

COMPACT
SF



Sf impulse

HARRY
HARRISON

**MAKE ROOM!
MAKE ROOM!**



impulse

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CRITIQUE

by Harry Harrison

While writers are social beasts, much given to the pleasures of the grape and the grain and conversation with their peers, they are individualists to a man and as hard to organize into a union or a guild as civil servants. But there has been founded, after the expected amount of verbal pyrotechnics, a group called the Science Fiction Writers of America—and more power to them, I say. Within one year, led by that reluctant warrior, Damon Knight, they have organized themselves, published a fascinating journal titled the SFWA BULLETIN, and been instrumental in publicising the news of the pirated edition of *Lord of the Rings*, which public attention resulted in J. R. R. Tolkien receiving royalties in excess of \$3,000.

Though the A in SFWA stands for America, the organization is as transatlantic as the Tolkien affair. American sf sells quite well this side of the waters, and British writers form the backbone of more than one U.S. publisher's sf stable. (And if you have never heard of the backbone of a stable you have not been reading your Sam Moskowitz.) Therefore it was only fitting that when the writers in the SFWA voted on the best sf works of the year, a story by an English writer should tie for the "Nebula" award for the best novelette.

Brian W. Aldiss went to New York to receive the award for his story, *The Saliva Tree*. I have it before me now, clad in a handsome turn-of-the-last-century jacket by Charles Mozley, in a volume titled *The Saliva Tree and other strange growths*. (Faber and Faber, 18s.) And it is a very strange growth indeed. A very pleasure-giving growth.

It has been said that sf has contributed one new thing to fiction, the "concealed setting" that is in a sense a mystery for the reader to solve. This is a world that we eventually discover is in total darkness where people "see" by bat-like sonar, or the world that appears to be ours but

is instead a parallel world with a golden crown in the middle of the American flag. Aldiss has done this, not with the setting of the story—which is obvious from the beginning—but with the style and the technique of his writing.

Do not hurl this journal aside, the preceding statement is not as terrible as it sounds. *The Saliva Tree* is wonderful entertainment from beginning to end, mostly because of this virtuoso performance. We are all slaves to style, whether we know it or not, so we should not shy away from a discussion about it. If you were presented with typewritten copies of two newspaper items of the same length, containing the same facts, one from the *Express* and one from *The Times*, could you tell them apart? (If you couldn't perhaps you *had* better throw this magazine aside). We pays our money and we takes our choice. Readers of romance novels *know* the book will have a happy ending, which is one of the reasons they bought it in the first place. Readers of sf expect the unexpected; they may not get it as often as they wish these days, but they will still get it.

The Saliva Tree is a tribute to H. G. Wells. No need to ask, after reading this, how Aldiss feels about Wells. The master lurks in the wings, one of the characters writes letters to him, and at one point you can feel him there, just outside, about to appear in the flesh. One of the quoted letters even contains, slightly changed, three titles of books by Wells. At this point the reader himself must enhance the value of the story by thinking of the process of Wells remembering and eventually using these titles. To me there was greater pleasure in discovering this than in finding lists of Irish rivers in the works of Joyce.

The style of the writing has a period charm that, while not being a copy or an imitation of the original, has the same mood and feeling. It admirably suits its subject, which is a Wells-type science fiction horror tale. Not an imitation though, Wells could never have written this story—though I'm sure he would have loved to read it. It is witty without being snide, and Aldiss has great fun with his archaisms.

But what the author has revealed is that the bars on our prison window are *not fastened in place*. He has written *vouchsafed* and *deleterious*, used *intercourse* in its

original meaning without being thought dirty, and in a hundred other ways shown us that all we have to do to escape our prison is to simply push the bars aside.

If sf can set its stories in any possible time or place—must it tell these stories in twentieth century, pulp-derived prose? This is what Aldiss asks us, and answers at the same moment. We are free. Churchill perhaps knew this, unless he naturally talked King James prose, but no one else. Like all good inventions—someone actually patented the paperclip—it is obvious once it has been disclosed. Now we can see why Alfred Bester's word-play to describe mental telepathy was so good, or what the typographical innovations in *Planet of The Damned* hoped to accomplish in conveying the sensations of empathy. These were ranging shots. Aldiss has hit the bull's-eye because he knew which target to aim at.

This is good news for the writers: they have a new tool they can use. This is good news for the readers: they'll be seeing more of the unexpected that they expect. What a pleasure it would be to read a story of the distant future written in a style that generated an illusion of being the prose of that future. Or futuristic dialogue that did not sound like Pat O'Brien talking to James Cagney. The past is available too—and this does not mean the ticket collector at the Globe Theatre saying, "Prithee, Will, how goweth Miftrifs Ann?" Of all the thousands of historical novels I have ever read, only one generated a sensation of actual period, *The Siege* by Jay Williams. I must re-read it with *The Saliva Tree* in mind.

Read *The Saliva Tree* for pleasure. The language has the same attention to detail and appeal as Captain Nemo's Victorian submarine in the film. Aldiss has succeeded in capturing in prose the hideous charm of the Albert Memorial, and I shall be forever grateful.

— HARRY HARRISON

We are proud to present the first part of Harry Harrison's latest and greatest novel, simultaneously with its appearance in hard-back in the U.S.A. If you have been thinking that the population explosion is just statistics—read this. It will frighten you.

MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!

by Harry Harrison

PROLOGUE

In December, 1959, the President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, said: "This government . . . will not . . . as long as I am here, have a positive political doctrine in its programme that has to do with this problem of birth control. That is not our business." It has not been the business of any American government since that time.

In 1950 the United States—with just nine and a half per cent of the world's population—was consuming fifty per cent of the world's raw materials. This percentage keeps getting bigger and within fifteen years, at the present rate of growth, the United States will be consuming eighty-three per cent of the annual output of the earth's materials. By the end of the century, should the American population continue to increase at the same rate, this single country will need more than one hundred per cent of the planet's resources to maintain its current living standards. This is a mathematical impossibility—aside from the fact that there will be about seven billion people on this earth at that time and—perhaps—they would like to have some of the raw materials too.

In which case, what will the world be like?

PART ONE

MONDAY, AUGUST 9th, 1999

NEW YORK CITY—

—stolen from the trusting Indians by the wily Dutch, taken from the law-abiding Dutch by the warlike British, then wrested in turn from the peaceful British by the revolutionary Colonials. Its trees were burnt decades ago, its hills levelled and the fresh ponds drained and filled, while the crystal springs have been imprisoned underground and spill their pure waters directly into the sewers. Reaching out urbanizing tentacles from its island home, the city has become a megalopolis with four of its five boroughs blanketing half of one island over a hundred miles long, engulfing another island, and sprawling up the Hudson River onto the mainland of North America. The fifth and original borough is Manhattan; a slab of primordial granite and metamorphic rock bounded on all sides by water, squatting like a steel and stone spider in the midst of its web of bridges, tunnels, tubes, cables and ferries. Unable to expand outward Manhattan has writhed upwards, feeding on its own flesh as it tears down the old buildings to replace them with the new, rising higher and still higher—yet never high enough, for there seems to be no limit to the people crowding here. They press in from the outside and raise their families, and their children and their children's children raise families, until this city is populated as no other city has ever been in the history of the world.

On this hot day in August in the year 1999 there are—give or take a few thousand—thirty-five million people in the city of New York.

I

The August sun struck in through the open window and burned on Andrew Rusch's bare legs until discomfort dragged him awake from the depths of heavy sleep. Only slowly did he become aware of the heat and the damp and gritty sheet beneath his body. He rubbed at his gummed-

shut eyelids, then lay there, staring up at the cracked and stained plaster of the ceiling, only half awake and experiencing a feeling of dislocation, not knowing in those first waking moments just where he was, although he had lived in this room for over seven years. He yawned and the odd sensation slipped away while he groped for the watch that he always put on the chair next to the bed, then he yawned again as he blinked at the hands mistily seen behind the scratched crystal. Seven . . . seven o'clock in the morning, and there was a little number *nine* in the middle of the square window. Monday the ninth of August, 1999—and hot as a furnace already, with the city still imbedded in the heat wave that had baked and suffocated New York for the past ten days. Andy scratched at a trickle of perspiration on his side, then moved his legs out of the patch of sunlight and bunched the pillow up under his neck. From the other side of the thin partition that divided the room in half there came a clanking whirr that quickly rose to a high-pitched drone.

"Morning . . ." he shouted over the sound, then began coughing. Still coughing he reluctantly stood and crossed the room to draw a glass of water from the wall tank: it came out in a thin, brownish trickle. He swallowed it then rapped the dial on the tank with his knuckles and the needle bobbed up and down close to the *empty* mark. It needed filling, he would have to see to that before he signed in at four o'clock at the precinct. The day had begun.

A full length mirror with a crack running down it was fixed to the front of the hulking wardrobe and he poked his face close to it, rubbing at his bristly jaw. He would have to shave before he went in. No one should ever look at himself in the morning, naked and revealed, he decided with distaste, frowning at the dead white of his skin and the slight bow to his legs that was usually concealed by his pants. And how did he manage to have ribs that stuck out like those of a starved horse, as well as a growing pot belly—both at the same time? He kneaded the soft flesh and thought that it must be the starchy diet, that and sitting around on his chunk most of the time. But at least the fat wasn't showing on his face. His forehead was a little higher each year, but wasn't too obvious as long as his hair was cropped short. You have just turned thirty, he thought to

himself, and the wrinkles are already starting around your eyes. And your nose is too big—wasn't it Uncle Brian who always said that was because there was Welsh blood in the family? And your canine teeth are a little too obvious so when you smile you look a bit like a hyena. You're a handsome devil, Andy Rusch, and when was the last time you had a date? He scowled at himself then went to look for a handkerchief to blow his impressive Welsh nose.

There was just a single pair of clean undershorts in the drawer and he pulled them on: that was another thing he had to remember today, to get some washing done. The squealing whine was still coming from the other side of the partition as he pushed through the connecting door.

"You're going to give yourself a coronary, Sol," he told the grey-bearded man who was perched on the wheelless bicycle, pedalling so industriously that perspiration ran down his chest and soaked into the bath towel that he wore tied around his waist.

"Never a coronary." Solomon Kahn gasped out, pumping steadily. "I been doing this every day for so long that my ticker would miss it if I stopped. And no cholesterol in my arteries either since regular flushing with alcohol takes care of that. And no lung cancer since I couldn't afford to smoke even if I wanted to, which I don't. And at the age of seventy-five no prostatitis because . . ."

"Sol, please—spare me the horrible details on an empty stomach. Do you have an ice cube to spare?"

"Take two—it's a hot day. And don't leave the door open too long."

Andy opened the small refrigerator that squatted against the wall and quickly took out the plastic container of margarine, then squeezed two ice cubes from the tray into a glass and slammed the door. He filled the glass with water from the wall tank and put it on the table next to the margarine. "Have you eaten yet?" he asked.

"I'll join you, these things should be charged by now."

Sol stopped pedalling and the whine died away to a moan then vanished. He disconnected the wires from the electrical generator that was geared to the rear axle of the bike, and carefully coiled them up next to the four black, automobile storage batteries that were racked on top of the refrigerator. Then, after wiping his hands on his soiled

towel sarong, he pulled out one of the bucket seats, salvaged from an ancient, 1975 Ford, and sat down across the table from Andy.

"I heard the six o'clock news," he said. "The Eldsters are organizing another protest march today on relief headquarters. *That's* where you'll see coronaries!"

"I won't, thank God I'm not on until four and Union Square isn't in our precinct." He opened the bread box and took out one of the six-inch square, red crackers, then pushed the box over to Sol. He spread margarine thinly on it and took a bite, wrinkling his nose as he chewed. "I think this margarine has turned."

"How can you tell?" Sol grunted, biting into one of the dry crackers. "Anything made from motor oil and whale blubber is turned to begin with."

"Now you begin to sound like a naturist," Andy said, washing his cracker down with cold water. "There's hardly any flavour at all to the fats made from petrochemicals and you know there aren't any whales left so they can't use blubber—it's just good chlorella oil."

"Whales, plankton, herring oil, it's all the same. Tastes fishy. I'll take mine dry so I don't grow no fins." There was a sudden staccato rapping on the door and he groaned. "Not yet eight o'clock and already they are after you."

"It could be anything," Andy said, starting for the door.

"It could be but it's not, that's the callboy's knock and you know it as well as I do and I bet you dollars to doughnuts that's just who it is. See?" he nodded with gloomy satisfaction when Andy unlocked the door and they saw the skinny, bare-legged messenger standing in the dark hall.

"What do you want, Woody?" Andy asked.

"I don' wan' no'fin," Woody lisped over his bare gums. Though he was in his early twenties he didn't have a tooth in his head. "Lieutenen' says bring, I bring." He handed Andy the message board with his name written on the outside.

Andy turned towards the light and opened it, reading the Lieutenant's spiky scrawl on the slate, then took the chalk and scribbled his initials after it and returned it to the messenger. He closed the door behind him and went back to finish his breakfast, frowning in thought.

"Don't look at me that way," Sol said, "I didn't send the

message. Am I wrong in guessing it's not the most pleasant of news?"

"It's the Eldsters, they're jamming the Square already and the precinct needs reinforcements."

"But why you? This sounds like a job for the harness bulls."

"Harness bulls! Where do you get that mediaeval slang? Of course they need patrolmen for the crowd, but there have to be detectives there to spot known agitators, pick-pockets, purse-grabbers and the rest. It'll be murder in that park today. I have to check in by nine, so I have enough time to bring up some water first."

Andy dressed slowly in slacks and a loose sport shirt, then put a pan of water on the windowsill to warm in the sun. He took the two five-gallon plastic jerrycans, and when he went out Sol looked up from the TV set, glancing over the top of his old-fashioned glasses.

"When you bring back the water I'll fix you a drink—or do you think it is too early?"

"Not the way I feel today, it's not."

The hall was ink black once the door had close behind him, and he felt his way carefully along the wall to the stairs, cursing and almost falling when he stumbled over a heap of refuse someone had thrown there. Two flights down a window had been knocked through the wall and enough light came in to show him the way down the last two flights to the street. After the damp hallway the heat of Twenty-fifth Street hit him in a musty wave, a stifling miasma compounded of decay, dirt and unwashed humanity. He had to make his way through the women who already filled the steps of the building, walking carefully so that he didn't step on the children who were playing and sprawling below. The sidewalk was still in shadow but so jammed with people that he walked in the street, well away from the kerb to avoid the rubbish and litter banked high there. Days of heat had softened the tar so that it gave underfoot, then clutched at the soles of his shoes. There was the usual line leading to the columnar, red water point on the corner of Seventh Avenue, but it broke up with angry shouts and some waved fists just as he reached it. Still muttering, the crowd dispersed and Andy saw that the duty patrolman was locking the steel door.

"What's going on?" Andy asked, "I thought this point was open until noon?"

The policeman turned, his hand automatically staying close to his gun until he recognized the detective from his own precinct. He tilted back his uniform cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Just had the orders from the sergeant, all points closed for twenty-four hours. The reservoir level is low because of the drought, they gotta save water."

"That's a hell of a note," Andy said, looking at the key still in the lock. "I'm going on duty now and this means I'm not going to be drinking for a couple of days . . ."

After a careful look around the policeman unlocked the door and took one of the jerrycans from Andy. "One of these ought to hold you." He held it under the tap while it filled, then lowered his voice. "Don't let it out, but the word is that there was another dynamiting job on the aqueduct upstate."

"Those farmers again?"

"It must be. I was on guard duty up there before I came to this precinct and it's rough, they just as soon blow you up with the aqueduct at the same time. Claim the city's stealing their water."

"They've got enough," Andy said, taking the full container. "More than they need. And there are thirty-five million people here in the city who get damn thirsty."

"Who's arguing?" the cop asked, slamming the door shut again and locking it tight.

Andy pushed his way back through the crowd around the steps and went through to the backyard first. All of the toilets were in use and he had to wait, and when he finally got into one of the cubicles he took the jerrycans with him: one of the kids playing in the pile of rubbish against the fence would be sure to steal them if he left them unguarded.

When he had climbed the dark flights once more and opened the door to the room he heard the clear sound of ice cubes rattling against glass.

"That's Beethoven's Fifth Symphony that you're playing," he said, dropping the containers and falling into a chair.

"It's my favourite tune," Sol said, taking two chilled

glasses from the refrigerator and, with the solemnity of a religious ritual, dropped a tiny pearl onion into each. He passed one to Andy who sipped carefully at the chilled liquid.

"It's when I taste one of these, Sol, that I almost believe you're not crazy after all. Why do they call them Gibsons?"

"A secret lost behind the mists of time. Why is a Stinger a Stinger or a Pink Lady a Pink Lady?"

"I don't know—why? I never tasted any of them."

"I don't know either, but that's the name. Like those green things they serve in the knockjoints, Panamas. Doesn't mean anything, just a name."

"Thanks," Andy said, draining his glass. "The day looks better already."

He went into his room and took his gun and holster from the drawer and clipped it inside the waistband of his pants. His shield was on his key ring where he always kept it and he slipped his notepad in on top of it, then hesitated a moment. It was going to be a long and rough day and anything might happen. He dug his nippers out from under his shirts, then the soft plastic tube filled with shot. It might be needed in the crowd, safer than a gun with all those old people milling about. Not only that, but with the new austerity regulations you had to have a damn good reason for using up any ammunition. He washed as well as he could with the pint of water that had been warming in the sun on the windowsill then scrubbed his face with the small shard of grey and gritty soap until his whiskers softened a bit. His razor blade was beginning to show obvious nicks along both edges and, as he honed it against the inside of his drinking glass, he thought that it was time to think about a new one. Maybe in the fall.

Sol was watering his window box when Andy came out, carefully irrigating the rows of herbs and tiny onions. "Don't take any wooden nickels," he said without looking up from his work. Sol had a million of them, all old. What in the world was a wooden nickel?

The sun was higher now and the heat was mounting in the sealed tar and concrete valley of the street. The band of shade was smaller and the steps were so packed with humanity that he couldn't leave the doorway. He carefully pushed by a tiny, runny-nosed girl dressed only in ragged

grey underwear and descended a step. The gaunt women moved aside reluctantly, ignoring him, but the men stared at him with a cold look of hatred stamped across their features that gave them a strangely alike appearance, as though they were all members of the same angry family. Andy threaded his way through the last of them and when he reached the sidewalk he had to step over the outstretched leg of an old man who sprawled there. He looked dead, not asleep, and he might be for all that anyone cared. His foot was bare and filthy and a string tied about his ankle led to a naked baby that was sitting vacantly on the sidewalk chewing on a bent plastic dish. The baby was as dirty as the man and the string was tied about its chest under the pipestem arms because its stomach was swollen and heavy. Was the old man dead? Not that it mattered, the only work he had to do in the world was to act as an anchor for the baby and he could do that job just as well alive or dead.

Christ, but I'm morbid this morning, Andy thought, it must be the heat, I can't sleep well and there are the nightmares. It's this endless summer and all the troubles, one thing just seems to lead to another. First the heat, then the drought, the warehouse thefts and now the Eldsters. They were crazy to come out in this kind of weather. Or maybe they're being driven crazy by the weather. It was too hot to think and when he turned the corner the shimmering length of Seventh Avenue burned before him and he could feel the strength of the sun on his face and arms. His shirt was sticking to his back already and it wasn't even a quarter to nine.

It was better on 23rd Street in the long shadow of the crosstown expressway that filled the sky above, and he walked slowly in the dimness keeping an eye on the heavy pedicab and tugtruck traffic. Around each supporting pillar of the roadway was a little knot of people clustered against it like barnacles around a pile, with their legs almost among the wheels of the traffic. Overhead there sounded a waning rumble as a heavy truck passed on the expressway and he could see another truck ahead parked in front of the precinct house. Uniformed patrolmen were slowly climbing into it and Detective Lieutenant Grassioli was standing next to the cab with a noteboard, talking to the sergeant.

He looked up and scowled at Andy and a nervous tic shook his left eyelid like an angry wink.

"It's about time you showed up, Rusch," he said, making a check mark on the noteboard.

"It was my day off, sir, I came as soon as the callboy showed up." You had to put up a defence with Grassy or he walked all over you: he had ulcers, diabetes and a bad liver.

"A cop is on duty twenty-four hours a day so get your chunk into the truck. And I want you and Kulozik to bring in some dips. I got complaints from Centre Street coming out of my ears."

"Yes, sir," Andy said to the lieutenant's back as he turned towards the station house. Andy climbed the three steps welded to the tailgate and sat down on the board bench next to Steve Kulozik who had closed his eyes and started to doze as soon as the lieutenant left. He was a solid man whose flesh quivered somewhere between fat and muscle, and he was wearing the same wrinkled cotton slacks and short sleeved shirt that Andy was, with the shirt also hanging over the belt to conceal the gun and holster. He opened one eye halfway and grunted when Andy dropped down beside him, then let it droop shut again.

The starter whined irritably, over and over, until finally the low quality fuel caught and the diesel engine slowly thudded to life, shuddered and steadied as the truck pulled away from the kerb and moved east. The uniformed policemen all sat sideways on the benches so they could catch some of the breeze from the truck's motion, and at the same time watch the densely populated streets; the police weren't popular this summer. If anything was thrown at them they wanted to see it coming. Sudden vibration wracked the truck and the driver shifted to a lower gear and leaned on his horn, forcing a path through the swarming people and hordes of creeping, man-powered vehicles. When they came to Broadway progress slowed to a crawl as people spilled over into the roadway next to Madison Square with its flea market and tent city. It was no better after they had turned downtown since the Eldsters were already out in force and heading south, and were haltingly slow in getting out of the truck's way. The seated policemen looked out at them indifferently as they rolled by, a

slowly surging mass ; grey heads, bald heads, most of them with canes, while one old man with a great white beard swung along on crutches. There were a large number of wheelchairs. When they emerged into Union Square the sun, no longer blocked by the buildings, burnt down unrelentingly upon them.

"It's murder," Steve Kulozik said, yawning as he swung down from the truck. "Getting all these old gaffers out in the heat will probably kill off half of them. It must be a hundred degrees in the sun—it was 93 at eight o'clock."

"That's what the medics are for," Andy said, nodding towards the small group of men in white who were unrolling stretchers next to a Department of Hospitals trailer. The detectives strolled towards the rear of the crowd that already half-filled the park, facing towards the speaker's platform in the centre. There was an amplified scratching sound and a quickly cut off whine as the public address system was tested.

"A record breaker," Steve said, his eyes searching the crowd steadily while they talked. "I hear the reservoirs are so low that some of the outlet pipes are uncovered. That and the up-state tubes dynamiting the aqueduct again . . ."

The squeal from the loudspeakers dissolved into the echoing thunder of an amplified voice.

". . . Comrades, Fellows and Dames, members all of the Eldsters of America, I ask your attention. I had ordered some clouds for this morning but it sure looks like the order never got through . . ."

An appreciative murmur rolled over the park, there were a few handclaps.

"Who's that talking?". Steve asked.

"Reeves, the one they call Kid Reeves because he's only six-five years old. He's business manager of the Eldsters now and he'll be their president next year if he keeps going like this . . ." His words were drowned out as Reeves's voice shattered the hot air again.

"But we have clouds enough in our lives so perhaps we can live without these clouds in the sky." This time there was an angry edge to the crowd's grumbling answer. "The authorities have seen to it that we cannot work, no matter how fit or able we are, and they have fixed the tiny, insulting, miserable handout that we are supposed to live

on and at the same time they see to it that money buys less and less every year, every month, almost every day . . ."

"There goes the first one," Andy said, pointing to a man at the back of the crowd who fell to his knees, clutching at his chest. He started forward but Steve Kulozik held him back.

"Leave it for them," he said, pointing to the two medics who were already pushing forward. "Heart failure or heat stroke and it's not going to be the last. Come on, let's circulate the crowd."

". . . once again we are called up to unite . . . forces that would keep us poverty ridden, starving, forgotten . . . the rising costs have wiped out . . ."

There seemed to be no connection between the small figure on the distant platform and the voice booming around them. The two detectives separated and Andy slowly worked his way through the crowd.

". . . we will not accept second best, or third or fourth best as it has become, nor will we accept a dirty corner of the hearth to drowse and starve in. Ours is a vital segment —no I'll say *the* vital segment of the population—a reservoir of age and experience, of knowledge, of judgment. Let City Hall and Albany and Washington act—or beware, because when the votes are counted they will discover . . ."

The words broke in crashing waves about Andy's head and he paid them no attention as he pushed between the painfully attentive Eldsters, his eyes alert and constantly moving, threading a path through the sea of toothless gums, grey-whiskered cheeks and watery eyes. There were no dips here, the lieutenant had been wrong about that, the pickpockets knew better than to try and work a crowd like this. Dead broke, these people, all of them. Or if they had a little change it was locked in one of those old clasp purses and sewn to their underwear or something.

There was a movement in the crowd and two young boys pushed through laughing to each other, locking their bare, scratched legs about each other's in a tumbling game, seeing who would fall.

"That's enough," Andy said, standing in front of them. "Slow down and out of the park, boys, there's nothing for you here."

"Who says! We can do what we wanna . . ."

"The law says," Andy snapped at them and slid the blackjack out of his pocket and lifted it warily. "Move!"

They turned without a word and made their way out of the crowd and he followed just far enough to make sure that they were gone. Kids, he thought as he slid the tube of shot away, maybe just ten or eleven years old, but you had to watch them closely and you couldn't let them give you any crap and you had to be careful because if you turned your back and there were enough of them they would pull you down and cut you up with pieces of broken glass like they did to poor damned Taylor.

Something seemed to possess the old people, they were beginning to move back and forth and, when the amplified voice was silent for an instant, distant shouting could be heard from beyond the speaker's platform. It sounded like trouble and Andy forced his way towards it. Reeves's voice suddenly broke off and the shouts were louder and there was the sharp sound of broken, falling glass. A new voice boomed from the loudspeakers.

"This is the police. I am asking you all to disperse, this meeting is over, and you will go north out of the Square—"

An enraged howl drowned the speaker and the Eldsters surged forward, carried on waves of emotion. Their screaming died and words could be made out again, the amplified voice of Reeves, the original speaker.

". . . Folks . . . easy now . . . I just want you to hold on . . . can't blame you for getting disturbed but it's not the way you think at all. The captain here has explained the situation to me and I can see, from where I'm standing, that this has nothing to do with our meeting. There's some kind of trouble over there on Fourteenth Street—NO!—don't move that way, you'll only get hurt, the police are there and they won't let you pass and there, I see them coming now, uptown there, the choppers, and the police have mentioned flying wire . . ."

A moan followed the last words and the crowd shuddered, the brownian movement reversed and they slowly began drifting uptown, out of Union Square, away from Fourteenth Street. The old people in this crowd knew all about flying wire.

Andy was past the speakers' platform and the crowd was thinner, he could now see the milling mob that jammed Fourteenth Street and began to move quickly towards it. There were policemen along the outer edge of it, clearing a space near the park and the nearest one raised his night stick and shouted.

"Stay back there, buddy, or you're going to be in trouble."

He nodded when Andy showed him his badge, then turned away.

"What's up?" Andy asked.

"Got a real riot brewing here and it's gonna get worse before it's better—get back there you!" He rapped his stick on the kerb and a bald man on aluminium crutches stopped and wavered a moment, then turned back into the park. "Klein's had one of those lightning-flash sales, you know, they suddenly put up signs in the windows and they got something that sells out quick, they done it before with no trouble. Only this time they had a shipment of soylent steaks—" He raised his voice to shout over the roar of the two approaching green and white copters. "—some chunkhead bought hers and went around the corner and ran into one of those roving TV reporters and blabbed the thing. People are pouring in from all over hell and gone and I don't think half the streets are blocked yet. Here's the wire now to seal off this side."

Andy pinned his badge to his shirt pocket and joined the patrolmen in pushing the crowd back as fast as possible. The mob didn't protest: they looked up and shuddered away from the flapping roar of the copters, jamming together like cattle. The copters came low and the bales of wire fell from their bottoms. Rusty iron bales of barbed wire that thudded and clanked down hard enough to burst their sealed wrapping.

This was not ordinary barbed wire. It had a tempered-steel core of memory wire, metal that no matter how it was twisted or coiled would return to its original shape when the restraints were removed. Where ordinary wire would have lain in a heaped tangle this fought to regain its remembered form, moving haltingly like a blind beast as the strains and stresses were relieved, uncoiling and stretching along the street. Policemen wearing heavy gloves grabbed the ends and guided it in the right direction to

form a barrier down the middle of the road. Two expanding coils met and fought a mindless battle, locking together and climbing into the air only to fall and struggle again and squirm on in a writhing union. When the last strand stopped scratching across the pavement the street was blocked by a yard high and a yard wide wall of spiked wire.

But the trouble wasn't over: people were still pushing in from the south along the streets that had not yet been sealed off by the wire. For the moment it was a screaming, pushing impasse because though more wire would stop the influx, in order to drop the wire the crowd had to be pushed back and a clear space made. The police were shoved back and forth in the face of the surging mob and above their heads the copters buzzed about like angry bees.

A sudden exploding crash was followed by shrill screams. The pressure of the jammed bodies had burst one of the plate glass show windows of Klein's and soft flesh was being jammed onto the knives of glass; there was blood and moans of pain. Andy fought his way against the tide towards the window; a woman with staring eyes and blood running from an open gash on her forehead bumped into him, then was carried away. Closer in Andy could barely move and above the shouting of the voices he could hear the shrill of a police whistle. There were people climbing through the broken window, even walking on the bleeding bodies of the injured, grabbing at the boxes piled there. It was the back of the food department. Andy shouted as he came closer, he could barely hear his own voice in the uproar, and clutched at a man with his arms full of packages who forced his way out of the window. He couldn't reach him—but others could and the man writhed and fell under the grabbing hands, his packages eddying away from him.

"*Stop!*" Andy shouted. "*Stop!*" as helplessly as though he were locked in a nightmare. A thin Chinese boy in shorts and much-mended shirt crawled out of the window almost at his fingertips, holding a white box of soylent steaks against his chest, and Andy could only stretch his hands out helplessly. The boy looked at him, saw nothing, looked away and bending double to his burden began to wriggle along the edge of the crowd against the wall, his thin body forcing a way. Then only his legs were visible,

muscles knotted as if he were fighting a rising tide, feet straining half out of the auto tyre-soled sandals. He was gone and Andy forgot him as he reached the broken window and pulled himself up beside the patrolman in the torn shirt who had preceded him there. The patrolman swung his night stick at the clutching arms and cleared a space. Andy joined him and skilfully sapped a looter who tried to break out between them, then pushed the unconscious body and spilled bundles back into the store. Sirens wailed and a splashing of white spray rose above the mob as the riot trucks began rumbling their way inwards with water nozzles streaming.

II

Billy Chung managed to work the plastic container of soylent steaks up under his shirt and, when he bent half double, it wasn't easily noticeable. For awhile he could still move, then the press became too much and he sheltered against the wall and pushed back at the forest of legs that hammered him and jammed his face against the hot dusty brick. He did not try to move and a knee caught him in the side of the head and half stunned him and the next thing he was aware of was a cool spray of water on his back. The riot trucks had arrived and their pressure hoses were breaking up the crowd. One of the columns of water swept over him, plastered him against the wall and was past. The push of the crowd was gone now and he tremblingly got to his feet, looking around to see if anyone had noticed his bundle, but no one had. The remnants of the mob, some of them bloody and bruised, all of them soaking wet, streamed past the lumbering riot trucks. Billy joined them and turned down Irving Place where there were fewer people and he looked desperately around for a hiding place, a spot where he could have a few moments of privacy, the hardest thing to find in this city. The riot was over and in a little while somebody would notice him and wonder what he had under his shirt and he would get it, but good. This wasn't his territory, there weren't even any Chinese in this neighbourhood, they would spot him, they would see him . . . He ran a bit but started to pant heavily

and slowed down to a fast walk. There had to be something.

There. Repairs or something against one of the buildings, a deep hole dug down to the foundation with pipes and a pool of muddy water at the bottom. He sat down next to the broken edge of the concrete sidewalk, leaned against one of the barriers that ringed the hole, bent forward and glanced around out of the corners of his eyes. No one looking at him, but plenty of people near, people coming out of the houses or sitting on the steps to watch the bedraggled mob move by. Running footsteps and a man came down the middle of the street holding a large parcel under his arm, glaring around with his fist clenched. Someone tripped him and he howled as he went down and the nearest people fell on him clutching for the crackers that spilled out onto the ground. Billy smiled, for the moment no one was watching him, and slid over the edge, going up to his ankles in the muddy bottom. They had dug around a foot-thick and corroded iron pipe making a shallow cave into which he backed. It wasn't perfect but it would do, do fine, only his feet could be seen from above. He lay sideways on the coolness of the earth and tore open the box.

Look at that—look at that, he said over and over again to himself and laughed as he realized he was beginning to drool and had to spit away the excess saliva. Soylent steaks, a whole box full, each flat and brown and big as his hand. He bit into one, choked and wolfed it down, forcing crumbling pieces into his mouth with his dirty fingers until it was so full he could hardly swallow, chewing at the lovely softness. How long had it been since he had eaten anything like this?

Billy ate three of the soybean and lentil steaks that way, pausing every now and then between bites and poking his head cautiously out, brushing the lanky black hair from his eyes as he looked upward. No one was watching him. He took more out of the box, eating them slowly now, and only stopped when his stomach was stretched out tautly, and grumbling at the unusual condition of being stuffed so full. While he licked the last of the crumbs from his hands he worked on a plan, already feeling unhappy because he had eaten so many of the steaks. Loot was what he needed and steaks were loot and he could have stuffed his gut as well

with weedcrackers. Hell. The white plastic box was too obvious to carry and too big to hide completely under his shirt, so he had to wrap the steaks in something. Maybe his handkerchief. He pulled this out, a dirty and crumpled rag cut from old sheeting, and wrapped it around the remaining ten steaks, tying the corners so they wouldn't fall out. When he tucked this under the waistband of his shorts it did not make too obvious a bulge, though it pressed uncomfortably against his full stomach. It was good enough.

"What you doing down that hole, kid?" one of the blowzy women seated on the nearby steps asked when he climbed back to the street.

"Blow it out!" he shouted as he ran for the corner followed by their harpy screams. Kid! He was eighteen years old even though he wasn't so tall, he was no kid. They thought they owned the world.

Until he got to Park Avenue he hurried, he didn't want to get any of the local gangs after him, then walked up-town with the slow moving traffic until he reached the Madison Square flea market.

Crowded, hot, filled with a roar of many voices that hammered at the ears and noisome with the smell of old dirt, dust, crowded bodies; a slowly shifting maelstrom of people moving by, stopping at stalls to finger the ancient suits, dresses, chipped crockery, worthless ornaments, argue the price of the small tilapia dead with gaping mouths and round, startled eyes. Hawkers shouted the merits of their decaying wares and people streamed along, carefully leaving room for the two hard-eyed policemen who walked side by side watching everything—but keeping to the main pathway that bisected the Square and led to the patched greyness of the old, Army pyramidal tents of the long-established temporary tent city. The police stayed out of the narrow paths that twisted away through the jungle of pushcarts, stands and shelters that jammed the Square, the market where anything could be bought, anything sold. Billy stepped over the blind beggar who sprawled across the narrow opening between a concrete bench and the rickety stall of a seaweed vendor and worked his way inward. He looked at the people there, not at what they were selling, and finally stopped before a pushcart loaded with a jumble

of ancient plastic containers, mugs, plates and bowls, with their once bright colours scratched and greyed by time.

"Hands off!" The stick crashed down on the edge of the cart and Billy jerked his fingers away.

"I'm not touching your junk," he complained.

"Move on if you're not buying," the man said, an oriental with lined cheeks and thin white hair.

"I'm not buying, I'm selling." Billy leaned closer and whispered so that only the man could hear. "You want some soylent steaks?"

The old man squinted at him. "Stolen goods, I suppose," he said tiredly.

"Come on—you want them or not?"

There was no humour in the man's fleeting smile. "Of course I want them. How many do you have?"

"Ten."

"A D and a half a piece. Fifteen dollars."

"Shit! I'll eat them myself first. Thirty D's for the lot."

"Don't let greed destroy you, son. We both know what they are worth. Twenty D's for the lot. Period." He fished out two worn ten-dollar bills and held them folded in his fingers. "Let's see what you have."

Billy pushed the stuffed handkerchief across and the man held it under the cart and looked inside. "All right," he said, and still with his hands beneath the cart, transferred them to a square of heavy, wrinkled paper and handed back the cloth. "I don't need that."

"The loot now."

The man handed it over slowly, smiling now that the transaction was finished. "Do you ever come to the Mott Street club?"

"Are you kidding?" Billy grabbed for the money and the man released it.

"You should. You're Chinese, and you brought these steaks to me because I'm Chinese too and you knew you could trust me. That shows you're thinking right . . ."

"Knock it off, will you grandpa." He hit himself in the chest with his thumb. "I'm Taiwan and my father was a general. So one thing I know—have nothing to do with you downtown commie chinks."

"You stupid punk—" He raised his stick but Billy was already gone.

Things were going to change now, yes they were! He did not notice the heat as he dodged automatically through the milling crowds, seeing the future ahead and holding tight to the money in his pocket. Twenty D's more than he had ever owned at one time in his life. The most he had ever had before was three-eighty that he had lifted from the apartment across the hall the time they had left their window open. It was hard to get your hands on cash money, and cash money was the only thing that counted. They never saw any at home. The Welfare ration cards took care of everything, everything that kept you alive and just alive enough to hate it. You needed cash to get on and cash was what he had now. He had been thinking about this for a long time.

He turned into the Chelsea branch of the Western Union on Ninth Avenue. The pasty-faced girl behind the high counter looked up and her glance slid away from him and out the wide front window to the surging, sunlit traffic beyond. She dabbed at the sweat droplets on her lip with a crumpled handkerchief, then wiped the creases under her chin. The operators, bent over their work, didn't look up. It was quiet here with just the distant hum of the city through the open door, the sudden lurching motion as a teletype clattered loudly. On a bench against the rear wall six boys sat looking at him suspiciously, their searching eyes ready to fill with hatred. As he went towards the dispatcher he could hear their feet shifting on the floor and the squeak of the bench. He had to force himself not to turn and look as he waited, imitating patience, for the man to notice him.

"What do you want, kid?" the dispatcher said, finally looking up, speaking through tight, pursed lips reluctant to give anything away, even words. A man in his fifties, tired and hot, angry at a world that had promised him more.

"Could you use a messenger boy, mister?"

"Beat it. We got too many kids already."

"I could use the work, mister, I'd work any time you say. I got the board money." He took out one of the ten-dollar bills and smoothed it on the counter. The man's eyes glared at it quickly, then jerked away again. "We got too many kids."

The bench creaked and footsteps came up behind Billy and a boy spoke, his voice thick with restrained anger.

"Is this chink bothering you, Mr. Burgger?" Billy thrust the money back into his pocket and held tightly to it.

"Sit down, Roles," the man said. "You know my rule about trouble or fighting."

He glared at the two boys and Billy could guess what the rule was and knew that he wouldn't be working here unless he did something quickly.

"Thank you for letting me talk to you, Mr. Burgger," he said, innocently, as he felt back with his heel and jammed his weight down on the boy's toes as he turned. "I won't bother you any more——"

The boy shouted and pain burst in Billy's ear as the fist lashed out and caught him. He staggered and looked shocked but made no attempt to defend himself.

"All right, Roles," Mr. Burgger said distastefully. "You're through here, get lost."

"But—Mr. Burgger . . ." he howled unhappily. "You don't know this chink . . ."

"Get out!" Mr. Burgger half rose and pointed angrily at the gaping boy. "Out!"

Billy moved to one side, unnoticed and forgotten for the moment, and knew enough not to smile. It finally penetrated to the boy that there was nothing he could do and he left—after hurling a look of burning malice at Billy—while Mr. Burgger scratched on one of the message boards.

"All right, kid. it looks like you maybe got a job. What's your name?"

"Billy Chung."

"We pay fifty cents every telegram you deliver." He stood and walked to the counter holding the board. "You take a telegram out you leave a ten buck board deposit. When you bring the board back you get ten fifty. That clear?"

He laid the board down on the counter between them and his eyes glanced down to it. Billy looked and read the chalked words, *fifteen-cent kickback*.

"That's fine with me, Mr. Burgger."

"All right." The heel of his hand removed the massage.

"Get on the bench and shut up. Any fighting, any trouble, any noise, and you get what Roles got."

"Yes, Mr. Burgger."

When he sat down the other boys stared at him suspiciously but said nothing. After a few minutes a dark little boy, even smaller than he, leaned over and mumbled, "How much kickback he ask?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't be a chunkhead. You kick back or you don't work here."

"Fifteen."

"I told you he would do it," another boy whispered fiercely. "I told you he wouldn't keep it at ten . . ." He shut up abruptly when the dispatcher glared in their direction.

After this the day rolled by with hot evenness and Billy was glad to sit and do nothing. Some of the boys took telegrams out, but he was never called. The soylent steaks were sitting like lead in his stomach and twice he had to go back to the dark and miserable toilet in the rear of the building. The shadows were longer in the street outside but the air still held the same breathless heat that it had for the past ten days. Soon after six o'clock three more boys trickled in and found places on the crowded bench. Mr. Burgger looked at the group with his angry expression, it seemed to be the only one he had.

"Some of you kids get lost."

Billy had had enough for the first day so he left. His knees were stiff from sitting and the steaks had descended far enough so he began to wonder what his mother would have for dinner: hell, he grimaced sourly, he knew what they would have for dinner. The same as every other night and every other year. On the waterfront there was a little breeze from the river and he walked slowly along Twelfth Avenue and felt it cool upon his arms. Behind the sheds here, with no one in sight for the moment, he pried open one of the wire clips that held on the tyre sole of his sandal and slipped the two bills into the crack. They were his and his only. He tightened the clip and climbed the steps that led to the *Waverly Brown* which was moored to Pier 62.

The river was invisible. Secured together by frayed ropes and encrusted chains the rows of ancient Victory and

Liberty ships made up an alien and rusty landscape of odd-shaped superstructures, laundry hung rigging, supports, pipes, aerials and chimneys. Beyond them was the single pier of the never-completed Wagner Bridge. This view did not seem strange to Billy because he had been born here after his family and the other Formosa refugees had settled into these temporary quarters, hastily constructed on the ships that had been rotting, unwanted, at their mooring up the river at Stony Point ever since the Second World War. There had been no other place to house the flood of newcomers and the ships had seemed a brilliant inspiration at the time ; they would certainly do until something better was found. But it had been hard to find other quarters and more ships had been gradually added until the rusty, weed-hung fleet was such a part of the city that everyone felt it had been there forever.

Bridges and gangways connected the ships and occasionally there would be a glimpse of foul, garbage-filled water between them. Billy worked his way over to the *Columbia Victory*, his home, and down the gangway to apartment 107.

"About time you got in," his sister Anna said. "Everyone's through eating and you're lucky I saved you anything." She took his plate from a high shelf and put it on the table. At the age of thirty-seven her hair was almost grey, her back bent into a permanent stoop, her hope of leaving the family and Shiptown long since gone. She was the only one of the Chang children who had been born in Formosa, though she had been so young when they left that her memories of the island were just vague and muted echoes of a pleasant dream.

Billy looked down at the damp slices of oatmeal and the brown crackers and felt his throat close up: the steaks were still clear in his memory, spoiling him for this. "I'm not hungry," he said pushing it away.

His mother had caught the motion and turned from the TV set, the first time she had bothered to notice him since he had come in.

"What is the matter with the food? Why are you not eating the food? That is good food." Her voice was thin and high-pitched with a rasping whine made more obvious because she spoke in intonated Cantonese. She had never

bothered to learn more than a few words of English and the family never spoke it at home.

"I'm not hungry," he groped for a lie that would satisfy her. "It's too hot. Here, you eat it."

"I would never take food from my children's mouths. If you won't eat it the twins will." While she talked she kept looking at the TV screen and the thunder of its amplified voices almost drowned out hers, throbbing against the shriller screeches of the seven-year-old boys who were fighting over a toy in the corner. "Here, give it to me. I'll have just a bite myself first, I give most of my food to the children." She put a cracker to her mouth and began to chew it with quick, rodentlike motions. There was little chance that the twins would see any of it since she was a specialist in consuming crumbs, leftover scraps, odds and ends: the pudgy roundness of her figure showed that. She took a second cracker from the dish without moving her eyes from the screen.

The heat and the nausea he was still feeling choked at Billy's throat. He was suddenly aware of the closeness of the steel-walled compartment, his brothers' whining voices, the scratchy roar of the TV, his sister rattling the plates as she cleared up. He went into the other room, the only other room they had, and pulled the heavy metal door shut after him. It had been a locker of some kind, it was only six-foot square, and was almost completely filled by the bed on which his mother and sister slept. A window had been made in the hull, just a rectangular opening with the ragged, thirty-year-old marks of the cutting torch still clear around the edge. In the winter they bolted a cover over it, but now he could lean his arms on the opening and look across the crowded ships to the distant lights on the New Jersey shore. It was almost dark, yet the air on his face felt just as hot as it had all day.

When the sharp edges of the metal began to cut into his arms he went and washed up in the basin of murky water behind the door. There wasn't much of it, but he scrubbed his face and arms and plastered his hair back as well as he could in the tiny mirror fixed to the wall: then turned quickly away and pulled down the corners of his mouth. His face was so round and young and when he relaxed his

mouth always had a slight curve so that he seemed to be smiling, and that was not how he felt. His face lied about him. With the last of the water he rubbed down his bare legs and removed most of the dirt and mud; at least he felt cooler now. He went and lay on the bed and looked at the photograph of his father on the wall, the only decoration in the room. Captain Chung Pei-fu of the Kuomintang Army. A career soldier who had dedicated his life to war and who had never fought a battle. Born in 1940 he had grown up on Formosa and had been one of the second generation soldiers in Chiang Kai-shek's time-marking, ageing army. When the generalissimo had died suddenly at the age of 84, Captain Chung had had no part in the palace revolutions that had finally pushed General Kung to the top. And when the disastrous invasion of the mainland had finally taken place he had been in the hospital, ill with malaria, and had stayed there during the Seven Deadly Days. He had been one of the very first people airlifted to safety when the island fell—even before his family. In the photograph he looked stern and military, not unhappy the way Billy has always known him. He had committed suicide the day after the twins had been born.

Like a vanishing memory the photograph faded from sight in the darkness, then appeared again, dimly seen, as the small light bulb brightened and dimmed as the current fluctuated. Billy watched as the light faded even more, until just the filament glowed redly, then went out. They were cutting the current earlier tonight, or probably something was wrong again. He lay in the suffocating darkness and felt the bed grow hot and sodden under his back and the walls of the iron box closed in on him until he could stand it no more. His moist fingers groped along the door until they found the handle and when he went into the other room it was no better, worse if anything. The flickering greenish light of the TV screen played over the shining faces of his mother, his sister, his two brothers, transforming their gape-jawed and wide-eyed faces into those of newly drowned corpses. From the speaker beat the tattoo of galloping hoofs and the sound of endless six-shooter gunfire. His mother squeezed mechanically on the old generator flashlight that had been wired to the set, so that it could be played when the house current was off. She

noticed him when he tried to go by and held out the generator to him, still contracting mechanically.

"You will squeeze this, my hand is tired."

"I'm going out. Let Anna do it."

"You will do what I say," she shrilled. "You will obey me. A boy must obey his mother." She was so angry she forgot to work the generator and the screen went black and the twins began crying at once, while Anna called to them to be quiet and added to the confusion. He did not go out—he fled—and did not stop until he was on deck, breathing hoarsely and covered with sweat.

There was nothing to do, no place to go, the city pressed in around him and every square foot of it was like this filled with people, children, noise, heat. He gagged over the rail into the darkness but nothing came up.

Automatically, scarcely aware he was doing it, he threaded his way through the black maze to the shore then hurried towards the wide-spaced street lights of 23rd Street: it was dangerous to be in the darkness of the city at night. Maybe he should take a look into Western Union, or maybe he better not bother them so soon? He turned into Ninth Avenue and looked at the yellow and blue sign and chewed his lip uncertainly. A boy came out and hurried away with a message board under his arm; that made room for another one. He would go in.

When he turned into the doorway his heart thudded as he saw that the bench was empty. Mr. Burger looked up from his desk and the anger was as fresh on his face as it had been that afternoon.

"It's a good thing you made up your mind to come back or you just wouldn't have to bother coming back. Everything is moving tonight, I don't know why. Get this delivered." He finished scrawling an address on the cover then slipped the gummed paper seal through the hole in the hinged boards and licked it and sealed it shut. "Cash on the counter." He slapped the board down.

The clip wouldn't unbend and Billy broke a fingernail when he had to work the money out and unroll one of the bills and slide it across the scratched wood. He held tight to the other bill, clutched at the board and hurried out, stopping with his back to the wall as soon as he was out of

sight of the office. There was enough light from the illuminated sign to read the address:

*Michael O'Brien
Chelsea Park North
W. 28 St.*

He knew the address and, though he had passed the buildings an untold number of times, he had never been inside the solid cliff of luxury apartments that had been built in 1976 after a spectacular bit of corruption had permitted the city to turn over Chelsea Park to private development. They were walled, terraced and turreted in new-feudal style, which appearance perfectly matched their function of keeping the masses as separate and distant as possible. There was a service entrance in the rear, dimly lit by a wire-caged bulb concealed in a carved stone cresset, and he pressed the button beneath it.

"This entrance is closed until oh-five hundred hours," a recorded voice clattered at him and he held the board to his chest in a quick spasm of fear. Now he would have to go around to the front entrance with its lights, the doorman, the people there: he looked down at his bare legs and tried to brush away some of the older stains. He was clean enough now, but there was nothing he could do about the ragged and patched clothing. Normally he never noticed this because everyone else he met was dressed the same way, it was just that things were different here, he knew that. He didn't want to face the people in this building, he regretted that he had ever worked to get this job, and he walked around the corner towards the brilliantly lit entrance.

A pondlike moat, now just a dry receptacle for rubbish, was crossed by a fixed walkway tricked out to look like a drawbridge, complete with rusty chains and a dropped portcullis of spike-ended, metal bars backed by heavy glass. Walking the brightly lit path of the bridge was like walking into the jaws of hell. The bulky figure of the doorman was silhouetted behind the bars ahead, hands behind his back, and he did not move even after Billy had stopped, just inches away on the other side of the barred glass, but kept staring down at him coldly with no change of expression. The door did not open. Not trusting himself to say anything Billy held up the message board so the name could

be seen on the outside. The doorman's eyes flicked over it and he reluctantly touched one of the decorative whorls and a section of bars and glass slid aside with a muffled sigh.

"I got a message here . . ." Billy was unhappily aware of the uncertainty and fear in his voice.

"Newton, front," the doorman said and jerked his thumb at Billy to enter.

A door opened on the far side of the lobby and there was a rumble of masculine laughter, suddenly cut off as a man came out and closed the door behind him. He was dressed in a uniform like the doorman's, deep black with gold buttons, but with only a curl of red braid on each shoulder rather than the other's resplendent frogging. "What's up, Charlie?" he asked.

"Kid with a telegram, I never saw him before." Charlie turned his back on them and resumed his watchdog position before the door, his duty done.

"The board is good," Newton said, twisting it from Billy's grasp before he realized what was happening, and running his fingers over the indented Western Union trademark. He handed it back and when Billy took it he quickly patted his shirt and shorts, under the arms and in the crotch.

"He's clean," then he laughed, "except I gotta go wash my hands now."

"All right, kid," the doorman said without turning, his back still to Billy, "bring it up and get down here again, quick."

The guard had his back turned too as he walked away leaving Billy alone in the centre of the lobby, in the middle of the stretch of figured carpet with no sign of what to do or where to go next. He wanted to ask directions but he could not, the automatic contempt and superiority of the men had disarmed him, driven him down so that all he wanted to do was find a place to hide. A gliding hiss from the far end of the room drew his numbed attention and he saw an elevator door slide open in the base of what he had taken to be a giant church organ. The operator was looking at him and Billy started forward, the telegram board held before him as though it were a shield against the hostility of the environment.

"I got a message here for Mr. O'Brien." His voice quavered and almost cracked. The operator, a boy no older than he was, produced a half-authentic sneer: he was young but was already working hard at learning the correct staff manners.

"O'Brien, 41-E, and that's on the fifth floor in case you don't know anything about apartment houses." He stood, blocking the elevator entrance, and Billy was uncertain what to do next.

"Should I . . . I mean, the elevator . . . ?"

"You ain't stinking up this elevator for the tenants. The stairs are down that way."

Billy felt the angry eyes following him as he walked down the hall and some of the anger caught in him. Why did they have to act like that? Just working in a place like this didn't mean they lived here. That would be a laugh—they living in a place like this. Even that fat chunk of a doorman. Five flights—he was panting for breath before he had reached the second and had to stop and wipe off some of the sweat when he got to the fifth. The hall stretched away in both directions, with alcoved doors opening off of it and an occasional suit of armour standing guard over its empty length. His skin prickled with sweat: the air was breathless and hot. He started in the wrong direction and had to retrace his steps when he found out that the numbers were decreasing towards zero. Number 41-E was like all the others without a button or knocker, just a small plate with the gilt-script word *O'Brien* on it. The door opened when he touched it and, after looking in first, he entered a small, darkly-panelled chamber with another door before him; a sort of medieval airlock. He had a feeling of panic when the door closed behind him and a voice spoke, apparently from thin air.

"What do you want?"

"A telegram, Western Union," he said and looked around the empty cubicle for the source of the voice.

"Let us see your board."

It was then he realized that the voice was coming from a grill above the inner door, next to the glassy eye of a TV pickup. He held up the board so that it could be seen by the orthicon. This must have satisfied the unseen watcher because there was the click of the circuit going dead and

shortly after that the door opened before him letting out a wave of chilled air.

"Let me have it," Michael O'Brien said, and Billy handed him the board and waited while the man broke the seal with his thumb and opened the hinged halves.

Though he was in his late fifties, iron grey, carrying an impressive paunch and a double row of jewels, O'Brien still bore the marks of his early years on the West Side docks. Scars on his knuckles and on the side of his neck—and a broken nose that had never been set correctly. In 1966 he had been a twenty-two-year-old punk, as he was fond of saying when he told the story, with nothing on his mind but booze and broads and a couple of days stevedoring a week to pay for the weekends, but when he had walked into a roundhouse swing in a brawl at the Shamrock Bar and Grill it had changed his life for him. While recovering in St. Vincent's (the nose had healed quickly enough but he had fractured his skull on the floor) he had taken a long look at his life and decided to make something of it. What it was he made he never added when he told the story, but it was common knowledge that he had become involved with ward politics, the disposal of hijacked goods from the docks and a number of other things that were best not to mention in his hearing. In any case his new interests paid better than stevedoring and he had never regretted a moment of it. Six-foot-two, and swaddled in an immense and colourful dressing-gown like a circus elephant, he could have been ludicrous, but wasn't. He had seen too much, done too much, was too sure of his power to ever be laughed at—even though he moved his lips when he read and frowned in concentration while he spelled out the telegram.

"Wait there, I want to make a copy of this," he said when he came to the end. Billy nodded, happy to wait as long as possible in the air-cooled, richly decorated hall. "Shirl, where the hell is the pad?" O'Brien shouted.

There was an indistinguishable answer from the door on the left and O'Brien opened it and went into the room. Billy's eyes automatically followed him through the lit doorway to the white-sheeted bed and the woman lying there.

She lay with her back turned, unclothed, red hair sweep-

ing across the pillow, her skin a whitish pink with a scattering of brown freckles across the shoulders. Billy Chung stood unmoving, his breath choked in his throat; she wasn't ten feet away. She crossed one leg over the other accentuating the round swell of buttock. O'Brien was talking to her but the words came through as meaningless sounds. Then she rolled over towards the open door and saw him.

There was nothing he could do, he could not move and he could not turn his eyes away. She *saw* him looking at her.

The girl on the bed smiled at him, then reached out a slender arm to the door, her breasts rose full and round, pink-tipped—the door swung shut and she was gone.

When O'Brien opened the door and came out a minute later she was no longer on the bed.

"Any answer?" Billy asked as he took back the message board. Did his voice sound as strange to this man as it did to him?

"No, no answer," O'Brien said as he opened the hall door. Time seemed to be moving slowly now for Billy, he clearly saw the door as it opened, the shining tongue of the lock, the flat piece of metal on the wall with the hanging wires. Why were these important?

"Aren't you gonna give me a tip, mister?" he asked, just to occupy a moment more.

"Beat it, kid, before I boot your chunk."

He was in the hall and the heat hit him doubly hard after the cool apartment, pressing on his skin and meeting the spreading warm that suffused the lower part of his body, just the kind of feeling he had the first time he got near a girl: he rested his head against the wall. Even in the pictures they passed around he had never seen a girl like this. All the ones he had banged had been glimpsed briefly in a dim light or not at all, thin limbs, grey skins, dirty as he, with ragged underclothing.

Of course. A single lock on the inner door guarded by the burglar alarm above. But the alarm was disconnected, he had seen the dangling wires. He had learned about things like this when Sam-Sam had run the Tigers, they had broken into stores and done a couple of jobs of burglary before the cops shot Sam-Sam. A sharp jimmy

would open that door in a second. But what did this have to do with the girl? She had smiled, hadn't she? She could be there waiting when the old bastard went to work.

It was a lot of crap and he knew it, the girl wouldn't have anything to do with him. But she had smiled? The apartment was different, a quick job before the wiring was fixed, he knew the layout of the building—if only there was a way of getting by those chunkheads at the front door. This had nothing to do with the girl, this was for cash. He went quietly down the stairs, looking carefully before turning the corner on the ground floor and hurrying on to the basement.

You had to ride your luck. He didn't meet anyone and in the second room he entered he found a window that also had a disconnected burglar alarm on it. Maybe the whole building was like that, they were rewiring it or it had broken and they couldn't fix it, it didn't matter. The window was covered with dust and he reached up and drew a heart in the film of dust so he could recognize it from the outside.

"You took a long time, kid," the doorman said when he came up.

"I had to wait while he copied the message and wrote an answer, I can't help it." He whined the lie with unsuspected sincerity, it was easy.

The doorman didn't ask to look at the board. With a pneumatic hiss the portcullis opened and he went across the empty drawbridge to the dark, crowded, dirty and stifling street.

III

Behind the low hum of the air-conditioner, so steady a sound that the ear accepted it and no longer heard it, was the throbbing rumble of the city outside, beating like a great pulse, more felt than heard. Shirl liked that, liked its distance and the closed in and safe feeling the night and thickness of the walls gave her. It was late, 3:24 the glowing numbers on the clock read, then changed soundlessly to 3:25 while she watched. She shifted position and beside her in the wide bed Mike stirred and mumbled something

in his sleep and she lay perfectly still, hoping he wouldn't wake up. After a moment he settled down, pulling the sheet over his shoulders, his breathing grew slow and steady again and she relaxed. The motion of the air was drying the perspiration from her skin, a cool feeling the length of her uncovered body, strangely satisfying. Before he had come to bed and woken her up she had had a few hours sleep and that seemed to be enough. Moving slowly she stood and walked over in front of the flow of air so that it washed her body in its stream. She ran her hands over her skin, wincing when they touched her sore breasts. He was always too rough and it showed on her kind of skin; she'd be black and blue tomorrow, then she'd have to put heavy makeup on to cover the marks. Mike got angry if he saw her with any blemishes or bruises, though he never seemed to think of that when he was hurting her. Above the air-conditioner the curtains were open a crack and the darkness of the city looked in, the widely separated lights like the eyes of animals: she quickly closed the curtains and patted them so they would stay shut.

Mike gave a deep, throaty gargle, a startling sound when you weren't used to it, but Shirl had heard it often enough. When he snored like that it meant he was really sound asleep—maybe she could take a shower without his knowing it! Her bare feet were noiseless on the rug and she closed the bathroom door so slowly that it never made a click. There! She switched on the fluorescents and smiled around at the plast-marble interior and the gold-coloured fixtures with highlights glinting everywhere. The walls were soundproof but if he wasn't really deeply asleep he might hear the water knocking in the pipes. A sudden fear hit her and she gasped and stood on tiptoe to look at the water meter. Yes, her breath escaped in a relaxed sigh, he had turned it on. With water costing what it did Mike turned it off and locked it during the day, the help had been stealing too much, and he had forbade her to take any more showers. But he always took showers and if she sneaked one once in a while he couldn't tell from the dial.

It was cool and lovely and she stayed in it longer than she had meant to: she looked guiltily at the meter. After she had dried herself she used the towel to mop up every drop of water in the tub and on the walls and floor, then

buried the towel in the bottom of the hamper where he would never see it. Her skin tingled and she felt wonderful. She smiled to herself as she patted on dusting powder: you're twenty-three, Shirl, and your dress size hasn't changed since you were nineteen. Except in the bust maybe, she was using a bigger bra, but that was all right because men liked it that way. She took a clean housecoat from the cupboard and slipped it on.

Mike was still sawing away when she passed through the bedroom, he seemed to be exhausted these days, probably tired from carrying around all that weight in this heat. In the year she had been living here he must have put on twenty pounds, most of it around the middle it looked like, but it didn't seem to bother him and she tried not to notice it. She turned on the TV to warm up, then went into the kitchen to make a drink. The expensive stuff, the beer and the single bottle of whisky, were for Mike only, but she didn't mind, she really didn't care what she drank as long as it tasted nice. There was a bottle of vodka, Mike could get all of that they needed, and it tasted good mixed with the orange concentrate. If you added some sugar.

A man's head filled the fifty-inch screen mouthing unheard words, looking right out at her: she pulled the gaping front of her housecoat closed and buttoned it. She smiled at herself when she did it, as she always did, because even though she knew the man couldn't see her it made her uncomfortable. The remote-box was on the arm of the couch and she curled up next to it with the drink and tapped the button. On the next channel was an auto race and on the next an old John Barrymore picture that looked jerky and ancient and she didn't like it. She went through most of the channels this way until she settled, as she usually did, on channel 19, the Woman's Own Channel, which showed nothing but soap opera serials, one serial at a time with all the episodes compacted together into a single, great, glutinous chunk sometimes running up to twenty-four hours. This was one she hadn't seen before and when she plugged the earphone into the remote she discovered why, it was a British serial of some kind. The people all had strange accents and some of the things they did were a little hard to follow, but it was interesting enough. A woman had just given birth, sweating and with-

out makeup, when she tuned in and the woman's husband was in jail but the news had come he had just escaped, and the man who was the father of the baby—a blue baby they had just discovered—was her husband's brother. Shirl took a sip of the drink and snuggled down comfortably.

At six o'clock she turned off the set, washed and dried her glass and went in to get her clothes. Tab came on duty at seven and she wanted to get the shopping done as early as possible, before the worst of the heat. Quietly, so as not to wake Mike, she found her clothes and took them into the living room to dress. Panties and the net bra and her grey sleeveless dress, it was old enough and faded enough to go shopping in. No jewellery and of course no makeup, there was no point in looking for trouble. She never ate breakfast, that was a good way to watch calories, but she did have a cup of black koffee before she left. It was just seven when she checked to see if her key and money were in her purse, took the big shopping bag from the drawer and let herself out.

"Good morning, miss," the elevator boy said, opening the door with a flourish and giving her a smile that displayed a row of not too good teeth. "Looks like another scorcher today."

"It's eighty-two already, the news said."

"That's not the half of it." The door closed and they whined down the shaft. "They take that temperature on top of the building and I bet down near the street it's a lot more than that."

"You're probably right."

In the lobby the doorman Charlie saw her when the elevator opened and he spoke into his concealed microphone. "Going to be another hot one," he said when she came up.

"Morning, Miss Shirl," Tab said, coming out of the guard room. She smiled, happy to see him as she always was, the nicest bodyguard she had ever known—and the only one who had never made a pass at her. She liked him not because of that but because he was the kind of man who would never even think of a thing like that. Happily married with three kids, she had heard all about Amy and the boys, he just wasn't that kind of man.

He was a good bodyguard though. You didn't have to

see the iron knucks on his left hand to know he could take care of himself; though he wasn't tall the width of his shoulders and the swelling muscles on his arms told their own story. He took the purse from her, buttoning it into his deep side pocket, and carried the shopping bag. When the door opened he went out first, bad party manners but good bodyguard manners. It was hot, even worse than she had expected.

"No weather report from you, Tab?" she asked, blinking through the heat at the already crowded street.

"I think you've heard enough of them already, Miss Sturl. I know I must have collected about a dozen on the way over this morning." He didn't look at her while he talked, his eyes swept the street automatically and professionally. He usually moved slowly and talked slowly and this was deliberate because some people expected a negro to be that way. When trouble began it usually ended an instant later since he firmly believed it was the first blow that counted and if you did that correctly there was no need for a second one, or more.

"After anything special today?" he asked.

"Just shopping for dinner and I have to go to Schmidt's."

"Going to take a cab crosstown and save your energy for the battle?"

"Yes—I think I will this morning." Cabs were certainly cheap enough, she usually walked just because she liked it, but not in this heat. There was a waiting row of pedicabs already, with most of the drivers squatting in the meagre shade of their rear seats. Tab led the way to the second one in line and steadied the back so that she could climb in.

"What's the matter with me?" the first driver asked angrily.

"You got a flat tyre, that's what's the matter with you," Tab said quietly.

"It's not flat, just a little low, you can't——"

"Shove off!" Tab hissed and raised his clenched fist a few inches; the sharpened iron spikes gleamed. The man climbed quickly into his saddle and pedalled off down the street. The other drivers turned away and said nothing. "Gramercy Market," he told the second driver.

The cab driver pedalled slowly so that Tab could keep up without running, yet the man was still sweating. His

shoulders went up and down right in front of Shirl and she could see the rivulets of perspiration running down his neck and even the dandruff on his thin hair: being this close to people bothered her. She turned to look at the street. People, shuffling by, other cabs moving past the slower moving tugtrucks with their covered loads. The bar on the corner of Park Avenue had a sign out saying BEER TODAY—2 PM and there were some people already lined up there. It seemed a long wait for a glass of beer, particularly at the prices they were charging this summer. There never was very much, they were always talking about grain allotments or something, but in the hot weather it was gone as soon as they got it in, and at fantastic prices. They turned down Lexington and stopped at the corner of 21st Street and she got out and waited in the shade of the building while Tab paid off the driver. A hoarse roar of voices came from the stalls in the food market that had smothered Gramercy Park. She took a deep breath and, with Tab close beside her so that she could rest her hand on his arm, she crossed the street.

Around the entrance were the weedcracker stalls with their hanging rows of multicoloured crackers reaching high overhead, brown, red, blue-green.

"Three pounds of green," she told the man at the stand where she always shopped, then looked at the price card. "Another ten cents a pound!"

"That's the price I gotta pay, lady, no more profit for me." He put a weight on the balance scale and shook crackers onto the other side.

"But why should they keep raising the price?" She took a broken piece of cracker from the scale and chewed it. The colour came from the kind of seaweed the crackers were made from and the green always tasted better to her, less of the iodiney flavour than the others had.

"Supply and demand, supply and demand." He dumped the crackers into the shopping bag while Tab held it open. "The more people there is the less to go around there is. And I hear they have to farm weed beds further away. The longer the trip the higher the price." He delivered this litany of cause and effect in a monotone voice like a recording that has been played many times before.

"I don't know how people manage," Shirl said as they

walked away and felt a little guilty because with Mike's bankroll she didn't have to worry. She wondered how she would get along on Tab's salary, she knew just how little he earned. "Want a cracker?" she asked.

"Maybe later, thanks." He was watching the crowd and deftly shouldered aside a man with a large sack on his back who almost ran into her.

A guitar band was slowly working its way through the crowded market, three men strumming homemade instruments and a thin girl whose small voice was lost in the background roar. When they came closer Shirl could make out some of the words, it had been the hit song last year, the one the El Troubadors sang.

"... on earth above her . . . As pure as thought as angels are . . . to know her was to love her."

The words couldn't possibly fit this girl with her hollow chest and scrawny arms, not ever. For some reason it made Shirl uncomfortable.

"Give them a dime," she whispered to Tab then moved quickly to the dairy stand. When Tab came after her she dropped a package of oleo and a small bottle of soymilk—Mike liked it in his kofee—into the bag.

"Tab, will you please remind me to bring the bottles back—this is the fourth one now! And with a deposit of two dollars apiece I'll be broke soon if I don't remember."

"I'll tell you tomorrow, if you're going shopping then."

"I'll probably have to. Mike is having some people in for dinner and I don't know how many yet or even what he wants to serve."

"Fish, that's always good," Tab said, pointing to the big concrete tank of water. "The tank is full."

Shirl stood on tiptoes and saw the shoals of tilapia stirring uneasily in the obscured depths.

"Fresh Island 'lapia," the fish woman said. "Come in last night from Lake Ronkonkoma." She dipped in her net and hauled out a writhing load of six-inch fish.

"Will you have them tomorrow?" Shirl asked. "I have to have them fresh."

"All you want, honey, got more coming tonight."

It was hotter and there was really nothing else that she needed here, so that left just one more stop to make.

"I guess we better go to Schmidt's now," she said and

something in her voice made Tab glance at her for a moment before he returned to his constant surveillance of the crowd.

"Sure, Miss Shirl, it'll be cooler there."

Schmidt's was in the basement of a fire-gutted building on Second Avenue, just a black shell above street level with a few squatters' shanties among the charred timber. An alleyway led around to the back and three steps went down to a heavy green door with a peephole in the centre. A bodyguard squatted in the shade against the wall, only customers were allowed into Schmidt's, and lifted his hand in a brief greeting to Tab. There was a rattle of a lock and an elderly man with sweeping, white hair climbed the steps one at a time.

"Good morning, Judge," Shirl said. Judge Santini and O'Brien saw a good deal of each other and she had met him before.

"Why, a good morning to you, Shirl." He handed a small, white package to his bodyguard who slipped it into his pocket. "That is, I wish it was a good morning but it is too hot for me, I'm afraid, the years press on. Say hello to Mike for me."

"I will, Judge, good-bye."

Tab handed her purse to her and she went down and knocked on the door. There was a movement behind the tiny window of the peephole, then metal clanked and the door swung open. It was dark and cool. She walked in.

"Well, if it ain't Miss Shirl, hiya, honey," the man at the door said as he swung it shut and pushed home the heavy steel bolt that locked it. He settled back on the high stool against the wall and cradled his double-barrelled shotgun in his arms. Shirl didn't answer him, she never did. Schmidt looked up from the counter and smiled a wide, porcine grin.

"Why, hiya, Shirl, come to get a nice little something for Mr. O'Brien?" He planted his big red hands solidly on the counter and his thick body, wrapped in blood-spattered white cloth, half rested on the top. She nodded but before she could say anything the guard called out.

"Show her some of the sweatmeat, Mr. Schmidt. I'll bet she goes for that."

"I don't think so, Arny, not for Shirl." They both laughed

loudly and she tried to smile and picked at the edge of a sheet of paper on the counter.

"I'd like steak or a piece of beef, if you have any," she said, and they laughed again. They always did this, knowing how far they could go without causing trouble. They knew about her and Mike and never did or said anything that would cause trouble with him. She had tried to tell him about it once, but there was no one thing she could tell him that they did that was wrong, and he had even laughed at one of their jokes and told her that they were just playing around and not to worry, that you couldn't expect party manners from meatleggers.

"Look at this, Shirl," Schmidt clanked open the box door on the wall behind him and took out a small flayed carcass. "Good leg of dog, nicely hung, good and fat too."

It did look good, but it was not for her so there was just no point in looking. "It's very nice, but you know Mr. O'Brien likes beef."

"Harder to get these days, Shirl." He moved deeper into the box. "Trouble with suppliers, jacking up the price, you know how it is. But Mr. O'Brien has been trading here with me for ten years and as long as I can get it I'm going to see he gets his share. How's that?" He came out and kicked the door shut, holding up a small piece of meat with a thin edging of white fat.

"It looks very good."

"Little over a half pound, big enough?"

"Just right." He took it from the scale and began to wrap it in pliofilm. "That'll set you back just twenty-seven ninety."

"Isn't that . . . I mean more expensive than last time?" Mike always blamed her when she spent too much on food, as if she were responsible for the prices, yet he still insisted on eating meat.

"That's how it is, Shirl. Tell you what I'll do though, give me a kiss and I'll knock off the ninety cents. Maybe even give you a piece of meat myself." He and the guard laughed uproariously at this. It was just a joke, like Mike said, there was nothing she could say: she took the money from her purse.

"Here you are, Mr. Schmidt, twenty . . . twenty-five . . . twenty-eight." She took the tiny slate from her purse and

wrote the price on it and placed it next to the money. Schmidt looked at it, then scratched an initial *S* under it with the piece of blue chalk he always used. When Mike complained about the price of the meat she would show this to him, not that it ever helped.

"Dime back," he smiled and slid the coin across the counter. "See you again soon, Shirl," he called out as she took up the package and started for the door.

"Yeah, soon," the guard said as he opened the door just wide enough for her to slide through. As she passed him he ran his hand across the tight rear of her dress and the closing of the door cut off their laughter.

"Home now?" Tab asked, taking the package from her.

"Yes—I guess so, a cab too, I guess."

He looked at her face and started to say something, then changed his mind. "Cab it is." He led the way to the street.

After the cab ride she felt better, they were slobs but no worse than usual and she wouldn't have to go back there until next week. And, as Mike said, you didn't expect party manners from meatleggers. They and their little-boy dirty jokes from grammar school! You almost had to laugh at them, the way they acted. And they did have good meat, not like some of the others. After she cooked the steak for Mike she would fry some oatmeal in the fat, it would be good. Tab helped her out of the cab and picked up the shopping bag.

"Want me to bring this up?"

"You better—and you could put the empty milk bottles in it. Is there any place you could leave them in the guard-room so we wouldn't forget them tomorrow?"

"Nothing to it. Charlie has a locked cabinet that we use, I can leave them there."

Charlie had the door open for them and the lobby felt cooler after the heat of the street. They didn't talk while they rode up in the elevator: Shirl rummaged through her purse for the key. Tab went down the hall ahead of her and opened the outer door but stopped so suddenly that she almost bumped into him.

"Will you wait here a second, please, Miss Shirl," he said in a low voice, placing the shopping bag silently against the wall.

"What is it . . . ?" she started, but he touched his finger

to his lips and pointed to the inner door. It was open about an inch and there was a deep gouge in the wood. She didn't know what it meant but it was trouble of some kind, because Tab was in sort of a crouch with his fist with the knucks raised before him and he opened the door and entered the apartment that way.

He wasn't gone long and there were no sounds, but when he came back he was standing up straight and his face was empty of all expression. "Miss Shirl," he said, "I don't want you to come in but I think it would be for the best if you just took a look into the bedroom."

She was afraid now, knowing something was terribly wrong, but she followed him obediently, through the living room and into the bedroom.

It was strange, she thought, that she was just standing there, doing nothing when she heard the scream, until she realized that it was her own voice, that she was the one who was screaming.

IV

As long as it had been dark, Billy Chung found the waiting bearable. He had huddled in a corner against the cool cellar wall and had almost dozed at times. But when he noticed the first greyness of approaching dawn at the window he felt a sudden, sharp spasm of fear that steadily grew worse. Would they find him hiding here? It had seemed so easy last night and everything had worked out so well. Just the way it had been when the Tigers had pulled those jobs. He had known just where to go to buy an old tyre iron, and no questions asked, and just a dime more to have the end sharpened. Getting into the moat around the apartment buildings had been the only tricky part, but he hadn't been seen when he dropped over the edge and he was sure no one had been looking when he jimmied open the cellar window with the tyre iron. No, if he had been seen they would have grabbed him by now. But maybe in the daylight they would be able to spot the jimmy marks on the window? He shivered at the thought and was suddenly conscious of the loud thudding of his heart. He had to force himself to leave the shadowed corner

and to work his way slowly along the wall until he was next to the window, trying to see through the dust-filmed glass. Before he had closed the window behind him he had rubbed spit, and soot from the ledge, into the marks the tyre iron had made: but had it worked well enough? The only clear spot on the window was the heart he had drawn in the dust and by moving his head around he looked through it and saw that the splintered grooves were obscured. Greatly relieved, he hurried back to his corner, but within a few minutes his fears returned, stronger than ever.

Full daylight was streaming through the window now—how long would it be before he was discovered? If anyone came in through the door all they had to do was look his way and they would see him: the small pile of old and cobwebbed boards behind which he cowered could not hide him completely. Shivering with fear he pushed back against the concrete wall so hard that its rough surface bit through the thin fabric of his shirt.

There was no way to measure this kind of time. For Billy each moment seemed endless—yet he also felt that he had spent a lifetime in this room. Once footsteps approached, then passed the door, and during those few seconds he found out that his earlier fear had been only a small thing. Lying there, shaking and sweating at the same time, he hated himself for his weakness, yet could do nothing about it. His nervous fingers picked at an old scab on his shinbone until it tore away and the wound began to bleed. He pressed his rag of a handkerchief over it and the seconds crept slowly by.

Getting himself to leave the cellar proved to be even harder than staying. He had to wait until the people in the apartment upstairs went out for the day—or did they go out?—another stab of fear. He had to wait but he could only estimate the time by looking at the angle of the sun through the clouded window and by listening to the sound of traffic in the street outside. By waiting as long as he could, then putting it off a little longer at the thought of the corridors outside, he reached the point when he felt that it was safe to leave. The jimmy went inside the waistband of his shorts where it couldn't be seen, and he

brushed off as much dust as he could before turning the handle on the door.

Voices and the sound of hammering came from some distant part of the cellar, but he saw no one on the way to the stairs. As he climbed the third flight he heard rapid footsteps coming down towards him, and he just managed to go back to the floor below and hide in the corridor until they passed. This was the last alarm and a minute later Billy was on the fifth floor looking at the golden lettering of *O'Brien* once again.

"I wonder if maybe she's still home?" he whispered half aloud and smiled to himself. "She's trouble—you want cash," he added, but his voice was hoarse. There was a clear and insistent memory of those round breasts, rising towards him.

When the outer door was opened it sounded some signal inside the apartment, that was what had happened last night. This was all right, he had to be sure no one was inside before he tried to break in. Before his nerve failed completely he pushed the door open and stepped inside, closing it again behind him and leaning his back against it.

Someone might still be home. He felt his face grow damp at the thought and looked at the TV pickup, then swiftly away. If she asks me I'll say something about Western Union, about a message. The walls of the tiny, empty chamber pressed in on him and he shifted from one foot to the other waiting for the crackle of the loudspeaker.

It remained silent. He tried to guess how long a minute was, then counted to sixty and knew that he had counted too fast and counted it again. "Hello," he said, and just in case the TV thing wasn't working he knocked on the door, timidly at first, then more loudly as his confidence grew.

"No one home?" he called as he took out the tyre iron jimmy and slipped the sharpened end into the jamb of the closed door just below the handle. When it had been pushed in as far as it would go he pulled hard with both hands. There was a small cracking sound and the door swung open. Billy stepped through, almost on tiptoe, ready to turn and run.

The air was cool, the apartment dim and silent. Ahead, at the end of the long hall, he could see a room and part of a dark TV set. Just at his left hand was the closed door

of the bedroom, the bed where she had been lying was just beyond it. Maybe she was still there, asleep, he would go in and not wake her at once but . . . he shivered. Shifting the tyre iron to his left hand he slowly opened the door.

Rumpled sheets, tangled and empty. Billy walked by the bed and didn't look at it again. What else had he expected? A girl like that wouldn't want someone like him. He cursed and pried open the top drawer in the large dresser, splintering and cracking it with the iron. It was filled with smooth underclothes, pink and white and softer than he had ever felt when he ran his hand over them. He threw them on the floor.

One by one he treated all the other drawers the same way, hurling their contents about, but putting aside those items of clothing he knew could be sold for a high price in the flea market. A sudden banging brought back the fear that had been displaced by anger for the moment, and he stood frozen. It took a long moment before he recognized it as water in a pipe somewhere in the wall. He relaxed a bit, was in better control now and, for the first time, noticed the jewel box on the end table.

Billy had it in his hand and was looking at the pins and bracelets and wondering if they were real and how much he could get for them, when the bathroom door opened and Mike O'Brien walked into the room.

For a moment he did not see Billy, he just stopped and gaped at the ruin of the dresser and the scattered clothing. He was wearing his dressing gown, spattered with dark spots of water, and was drying his hair with a towel. Then he saw Billy, standing rigid with terror, and hurled the towel away.

"You little bastard!" Mike roared. "What the hell are you doing here!"

He was like a mountain of death approaching, with his great face flushed from the shower and reddened even more by rage. He stood two heads taller than Billy and there was muscle under the fat on his meaty arms, and all he wanted to do was break the boy in two.

Mike reached out with both hands and Billy felt the wall against his back. There was a weight in his right hand and he swung in panic, lashing out wildly. He hardly realized what had happened when Mike fell at his feet, not uttering

a sound ; there was just the heavy thud of his body hitting the floor.

Michael J. O'Brien's eyes were open, open wide and staring, but they were not seeing. The tyre iron had caught him on the side of the temple, the sharp point cracking through the thin bone there and going on into his brain, killing him instantly. There was very little blood since the tyre iron remained, a projecting, black handle stuck fast in the wound.

It was just by chance, a combination of circumstances, that Billy was not caught or recognized when he was leaving the building. He fled in blind panic and did not meet anyone on the stairs, but he missed a turning and found himself near the service entrance. A new tenant was moving in and at least a score of men, dressed in the same sort of ragged garments he wore, were carrying in furniture. The single, uniformed attendant on duty was watching the people who entered the building and paid no attention at all when Billy walked out behind two of the others.

Billy was almost to the waterfront before he realized that in his flight he had left everything behind. He leaned his back to a wall, then slid slowly down until he squatted on his heels panting with exhaustion, wiping the sweat from his eyes so he could see if anyone had followed him. No one was taking any notice of him, he had escaped. But he had killed a man—and all for nothing. He shuddered, in spite of the heat, and gasped for air. Nothing, it had all been for nothing.

V

"Just like that? You want us to drop whatever we're doing and come running, just like that?" Lieutenant Grassioli's angry question lost some of its impact when he ended it with a deep belch. He took a jar of white tablets from the top drawer of his desk, shook two of them out into his hand and looked at them distastefully before

putting them into his mouth. "What happened over there?" The words were accompanied by a dry, grating sound as he chewed the tablets.

"I don't know, I wasn't told." The man in the black uniform stood in an exaggerated position of attention, but there was the slightest edge of rudeness to his words. "I'm just a messenger, sir. I was told to go to the nearest police station and deliver the following message. 'There has been some trouble. Send a detective at once.' "

"Do you people in Chelsea Park think you can give orders to the police department?" The messenger didn't answer because they both knew that the answer was yes and it was better left unspoken. A number of very important private and public individuals lived in these buildings. The lieutenant winced at the quick needle of pain in his stomach. "Send Rusch here," he shouted.

Andy came in a few moments later. "Yes, sir?"

"What are you working on?"

"I have a suspect, he may be the paper-hanger who has been passing all those bum cheques in Brooklyn, I'm going to . . ."

"Put him on ice. There's a report here I want you to follow up."

"I don't know if I can do that, he's . . ."

"If I say you can do it—*do it*. This is my precinct, not yours, Rusch. Go with this man and report to me personally when you come back." The belch was smaller this time, more of a punctuation than anything else.

"Your lieutenant has some temper," the messenger said when they were out in the street.

"Shut up," Andy snapped without looking at the man. He had had another bad night and was tired. And the heat wave was still on; the sun almost unbearable when they left the shadow of the expressway and walked north. He squinted into the glare and felt the beginning of a headache squeeze at his temples. There was trash blocking the sidewalk and he kicked it angrily aside. They turned a corner and were in shadow again, the crenellated battlements and towers of the apartment buildings rose like a cliff above them. Andy forgot the headache as they walked across the drawbridge: he had only been inside the place once before,

just into the lobby. The door opened before they reached it and the doorman stepped aside to let them in.

"Police," Andy said, showing his badge to the doorman. "What's wrong here?"

The big man didn't answer at first, just swivelled his head to follow the retreating messenger until he was out of earshot. Then he licked his lips and whispered, "It's pretty bad." He tried to look depressed but his eyes glittered with excitement. "It's . . . murder . . . someone's been killed."

Andy wasn't impressed: the City of New York averaged seven murders a day, and ten on good days. "Let's go see about it," he said, and followed the doorman towards the elevator.

"This is the one," the doorman said, opening the hall door of apartment 41-E: cool air surged out, fresh on Andy's face.

"That's all," he said to the disappointed doorman, "I'll take it from here." He walked in and at once noticed the jimmy grooves on the inner doorjamb, looked beyond them to the long length of hall where the two people sat on chairs backed to the wall. A full bag of groceries leaned against the nearest chair.

They were alike in their expressions with fixed, round eyes, shocked at the sudden impact of the totally unexpected. The girl was an attractive redhead, nice long hair and a delicate pink complexion. When the man got quickly to his feet Andy saw that he was a bodyguard, a chunky Negro.

"I'm Detective Rusch, 12-A Precinct."

"My name is Tab Fielding, this is Miss Greene—she lives here. We just came back from shopping a little while ago and I saw the jimmy marks on the door. I came in by myself and went in there," he jerked his thumb at a nearby closed door. "I found him. Mr. O'Brien. Miss Greene came in a minute later and saw him too. I looked through the whole place but there was no one else here. Miss Shirl—Miss Greene—stayed here in the hall while I went to call the police, we've been here ever since. We didn't touch anything inside."

Andy glanced back and forth at them and suspected the story was true; it could be checked easily enough with the

elevator boy and the doorman. Still, there was no point in taking chances.

"Will you both please come in with me."

"I don't want to," the girl said quickly, her fingers tightening on the sides of the chair. "I don't want to see him like that again."

"I'm sorry. But I'm afraid I can't leave you out here alone."

She didn't argue any more, just stood up slowly and brushed at the wrinkles in her grey dress. A very good-looking girl, Andy realized as she walked by him. The bodyguard held the door open and Andy followed them both into the bedroom. Keeping her face turned towards the wall the girl went quickly to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

"She'll be all right," Tab said, noticing the detective's attention. "She's a tough enough kid, but you can't blame her for not wanting to see Mr. O'Brien, not like that."

For the first time Andy looked at the body. He had seen a lot worse. Michael O'Brien was still as impressive in death as he had been in life: sprawled on his back, arms and legs spread wide, mouth agape and eyes open and staring. The length of iron projected from the side of his head and a thin trickle of dark blood ran down the side of his neck to the floor. Andy kneeled and touched the bared skin on his forearm; it was very cool. The air-conditioned room would have something to do with that. He stood and looked at the bathroom door.

"Can she hear us in there?" he asked.

"No, sir. It's sound-proofed, the whole apartment is."

"You said she lives here. What does that mean?"

"She is—was Mr. O'Brien's girl. She's got nothing to do with this, no reason to have anything to do with it. He was her cracker and marge—" Realization hit and his shoulders slumped. "Mine too. We both gotta look for a new job now." He retired into himself, looking with great unhappiness at a suddenly insecure future.

Andy glanced around at the disordered clothing and the splintered dresser. "They could have had a fight before she went out today, she might have done it then."

"Not Miss Shirl!" Tab's fists clenched tight. "She's not the kind of person who could do this sort of thing. When

I said tough I meant she could roll with things, you know, get along with the world. She couldn't have done this. It would have to be before I met her downstairs, I wait for her in the lobby, and she came down today just like she always does. Nice and happy, she couldn't have acted like that if she had just come from *this*." He pointed angrily at the mountainous corpse that lay between them.

He didn't say so, but Andy agreed with the bodyguard. A good-looking bird like this one didn't have to kill anyone. What she did she did for D's and if a guy gave her too much trouble she'd just walk out and find someone else with money. Not murder.

"What about you, Tab, did you knock the old boy off?"

"Me?" He was surprised, not angry. "I wasn't even up in the building until I came back with Miss Shirl and found him." He straightened up with professional pride. "And I'm a bodyguard. I have a contract to protect him. I don't break contracts. And when I kill anyone it's not like *that*—that's no way to kill anyone."

Every minute in the air-conditioned room made Andy feel better. The drying sweat was cool on his body and the headache was almost gone. He smiled. "Off the record—strictly—I agree with you. But don't quote me until I make a report. It looks like a break and entry. O'Brien walked in on whoever was burglarizing the place and caught that thing in the side of his head." He glanced down at the silenced figure. "Who was he—what did he do for a living? O'Brien's a common name."

"He was in business," Tab said flatly.

"You're not telling me much, Fielding. Why don't you run that through again."

Tab glanced towards the closed door of the bathroom and shrugged. "I don't know exactly what he did—and I have enough brains not to bother myself about it. He had something to do with the rackets, politics too. I know he had a lot of top-brass people from city hall coming here—"

Andy snapped his fingers. "O'Brien—he wouldn't be Big Mike O'Brien?"

"That's what they called him."

"Big Mike . . . well, there's no loss then. In fact we could lose a few more like him and not miss any of them."

"I wouldn't know about that." Tab looked straight ahead, his face expressionless.

"Relax. You're not working for him any more. Your contract has just been cancelled."

"I've been paid to the end of the month. I'll finish my job."

"It was finished at the same time as the guy on the floor. I think you better look after the girl instead."

"I'm going to do that." His face relaxed and he glanced at the detective. "It's not going to be easy for her."

"She'll get by," Andy said flatly. He took out his notepad and stylo. "I'll talk to her now. I need a complete report. Stick around the apartment until I see her and the building employees. If their stories back you up there'll be no reason to keep you."

When he was alone with the body, Andy took the polythene evidence bag from his pocket and worked it down over the iron without touching it, then pulled the weapon free of the skull by holding onto it through the bag, as low down as possible; it came away easily enough and there was only a slow trickle of blood from the wound. He sealed the bag, then took a pillowcase from the bed and dropped the bag and tyre iron into this. There would be no complaints now if he carried the bloody iron in the street—and if he worked it right he could get to keep the pillowcase. He spread a sheet over the body before knocking on the bathroom door.

Shirl opened the door a few inches and looked out at him. "I want to talk to you," he said, then remembered the body on the floor behind him. "Is there another room—?"

"The living room, I'll show you."

She opened the door all the way and came out, once more walking close to the wall without looking down at the floor. Tab was sitting in the hall, and he watched them silently as they passed.

"Make yourself comfortable," Shirl said, "I'll be with you in just a moment." She went into the kitchen.

Andy sat on the couch, it was very soft, and put his notepad on his knee. Another air-conditioner hummed in the window and the floor to ceiling curtains were closed almost all the way, so that the light was dim and comfortable. The television set was a monster. There were pictures

on the walls, they looked like real paintings, books, a dining table and chairs in some kind of red wood. Very nice for someone.

"Do you want a drink?" Shirl called out from the kitchen, holding up a tall glass. "This is vodka."

"I'm on duty, thanks all the same. Some cold water will do fine."

She brought the two glasses in on a tray and, instead of handing his glass to him, pressed it against the side of the couch near his hand. When she let go the glass remained there, defying gravity. Andy pulled at it and it came free with a slight tug: he saw that there were rings of metal worked into the glass, so there must be magnets concealed under the fabric. Very elegant. For some reason this annoyed him and, after drinking some of the cold, flavourless water, he put the glass on the floor by his foot.

"I would like to ask you some questions," he said, making a tick mark on the notepad. "What time did you leave the apartment this morning?"

"Just seven o'clock, that's when Tab comes on duty. I wanted to do the shopping before it was too hot."

"Did you lock the door behind you?"

"It's automatic, it locks itself, there's no way to leave it open unless you block it with something."

"Was O'Brien alive when you left?"

She looked up at him angrily. "Of course! He was asleep, snoring. Do you think that *I* killed him?" The anger in her face turned to pain as she remembered what was lying in the other room: she took a quick gulp from her drink.

Tab's voice came from the doorway. "When I touched Mr. O'Brien's body it was still warm. Whoever killed him must have done it just a little while before we came in—"

"Go sit down and don't come in here again," Andy said sharply, without turning his head. He took a sip of the ice water and wondered what he was getting excited about. What difference did it make who had polished off Big Mike? It was a public service. The odds were all against this girl having done it. What motive? He looked at her closely and she caught his eye and turned away, pulling her skirt down over her knees as she did.

"What I think doesn't matter," he said, but the words

didn't even satisfy him. "Look, Miss Greene. I'm just a cop doing my job. Tell me what I want to know so I can write it down and give it to the lieutenant, so he can make a report. Personally, I don't think that you had anything to do with this killing. But I still have to ask the questions."

It was the first time he had seen her smile and he liked it. Her nose wrinkled and it was a broad, friendly grin. She was a cute kid and she would make out, oh yes, she would make out with anyone who had the D's. He looked back at his notepad and slashed a heavy line under *Big Mike*.

Tab closed the door behind Andy when he left, then waited a few minutes to be sure he wasn't coming back. When he went into the living room he stood so that he could watch the hall door and would know the moment it was opened.

"Miss Shirl, there's something you should know."

She was on her third large drink, but the alcohol did not seem to be having any affect. "What is that?" she asked tiredly.

"I'm not trying to be personal or anything, and I don't know anything about Mr. O'Brien's will . . ."

"You can put your mind at rest. I've seen it and everything goes to his sister. I'm not mentioned in it—and neither are you."

"I wasn't thinking about myself," he said coldly, his face suddenly hard. She was sorry at once.

"Please, I didn't mean it that way. I'm just being—I don't know, bitchy. Everything happening at once like this. Don't be angry at me, Tab—please . . ."

"I guess you were being a little bitchy." He smiled for a moment before he dug into his pocket. "I figured it would be something like that. I have no complaints about Mr. O'Brien as an employer, but he took care of his money. Didn't throw it around, that's what I mean. Before the detective came I went through Mr. O'Brien's wallet. It was in his jacket. I left a few D's there but I took the rest—here." He pushed his hand out with a folded wad of bills in it. "It's yours, yours by right."

"I couldn't . . ."

"You *have* to. Things are going to be rough, Shirl.

You're going to need it more than his family. There's no record of it. It's yours by right."

He put the money on the end table and she looked at it. "I suppose I should. That sister of his has enough without this. But we better split it—"

"No," he said flatly, just as the dull buzz of the announcer signalled that someone had opened the outer door from the hall.

"Department of Hospitals," a voice said and Tab could see two men in white uniforms on the TV screen inset near the door. They were carrying a stretcher. He went to let them in.

VI

"How long you gonna be, Charlie?"

"That's my business—you just hold the fort until I get back," the doorman grunted, and looked the uniformed guard over with what he liked to think was a military eye. "I seen a lot better looking gold buttons in my time."

"Have a heart, Charlie, you know they're just plastic. They'll fall to pieces if I try to rub on them."

In the loosely organized hierarchy of employees in Chelsea Park, Charlie was the unquestioned leader. It wasn't a matter of salary—this was probably the smallest part of his income—but a matter of position and industry. He was the one who saw the tenants most often and he lost nothing by this advantage. His contacts outside the buildings were the best and he could get anything the residents wanted—for a price. All the tenants liked him and called him Charlie. All the employees hated him and he had never heard what they called him.

Charlie's basement apartment came with the job, though the management would have been more than a little surprised at the number of improvements that had been made. An ancient air-conditioner wheezed and hammered and lowered the temperature at least ten degrees. Two decades of cast-off and restored furniture contributed a note of mixed colour, while an impressive number of locked cabinets covered the walls. These contained a large collec-

tion of packaged food and bottled drink none of which Charlie touched himself, but instead resold at a substantial mark-up to the tenants. Not the least of the improvements was the absence of water and electric meters: the building management unsuspectedly financed both of these major expenses for Charlie.

Two keys were needed to open the door and both were chained to his belt. He went in and hung his uniform coat carefully in the closet, then put on a clean but much-patched sport shirt. The new elevator boy was still asleep in the big double bed and he kicked the frame of the bed with his number fourteen shoe.

"Get up. You go to work in an hour."

Reluctantly, still half asleep, the boy crawled out of the bedclothes and stood there, naked and slim, scratching at his ribs. Charlie smiled in pleasant memory of the previous night and smacked the boy lightly on his lean buttock.

"You're going to be all right, kid," he said. "Just take care of old Charlie, and Charlie will take care of you."

"Sure, Mr. Charlie, sure," the boy said, forcing interest into his voice. This whole thing was new to him and he still didn't like it very much, but it got him the job. He smiled coyly.

"That's enough of that," Charlie said and slapped the boy again, but this time hard enough to leave a red print on the white skin. "Just make sure the door is locked behind you when you go, and keep your mouth shut on the job." He went out.

The street was a lot hotter than he had thought it would be, so he whistled for a cab. This morning's work should net him enough to pay for a dozen cabs. Two empty pedicabs raced for his business and he sent the first one away because the driver was too runty and thin: he was in a hurry and he weighed 240 pounds.

"Empire State Building. Thirty-fourth Street entrance. And make some time."

"In this weather?" the driver grunted, standing on the pedals and lurching the creaking machine into motion. "You want to kill me, general?"

"Die. It won't bother me. I'll give you a D for the trip."

"You want me to die by starving, maybe? That much won't take you as far as Fifth Avenue."

They haggled the price most of the trip, twisting their way through the crowded streets, shouting to be heard above the unending noise of the city, a sound they were both so used to that they weren't even aware of it.

Because of the power shortage and lack of replacement parts there was only one elevator running in the Empire State Building, and this one went only as high as the twenty-fifth floor. After that you walked. Charlie climbed two flights and nodded to the bodyguard who sat at the foot of the stairs to the next floor. He had been here before and the man knew him, as did the three other guards at the head of the stairs. One of them unlocked the door for him.

With his shoulder-length, white hair Judge Santini bore a strong resemblance to an Old Testament prophet. He didn't sound like one.

"Crap, that's what it is, crap. I pay a goddamn fortune for flour just so I can get a good bowl of pasta and what do you turn it into?" He pushed the plate of spaghetti away distastefully and dabbed the sauce from his lips with the large napkin he had tucked into his shirt collar.

"I did the best I could," his wife shouted back. She was small and dark and twenty years younger than he. "You want somebody to make spaghetti for you by hand, you should have married a *contadina* from the old country with broken arches and a moustache. I was born right here in the city on Mulberry Street, just like you, and all I know about spaghetti is you buy it from the grocery store——"

The shrill ring of the telephone cut through her words and silenced her instantly. They both looked at the instrument on the desk, then she turned and hurriedly left the room, closing the door behind her. There weren't many calls these days and what few came through were always important and about business she did not want to hear. Rosa Santini enjoyed all the luxuries that life provided, and what she didn't know about the judge's business wasn't going to bother her.

Judge Santini stood, wiped his mouth again and laid the napkin on the table. He didn't hurry, not at his age he didn't, but neither did he dawdle. He sat down at the desk, took out a blank notepad and stylo and reached for the phone. It was an old instrument with the cracked handpiece

held together by wrappings of friction tape, while the cord was frayed and spliced.

"Santini speaking," he said and listened carefully, his eyes widened. "Mike—Big Mike—my God!" After this he said little, just yes and no, and when he hung up his hands were shaking.

"Big Mike," Lieutenant Grassioli said, almost smiling: even a mindful twinge from his ulcer didn't depress him as it usually did. "Someone did a good day's work." The bloodstained jimmy lay on the desk before him and he admired it as though it were a work of art. "Who did it?"

"The chances are that it was a break and entry that went wrong," Andy said, standing on the other side of the desk. He read from his notepad, quickly summing up all the relevant details. Grassioli grunted when he finished and pointed to the traces of fingerprint powder on the end of the iron.

"What about this? Prints any good?"

"Very clear, lieutenant. Thumb and first three fingers of the right hand."

"Any chance that the bodyguard or the girl polished the old bastard off?"

"I'd say one in a thousand, sir. No motive at all—he was the one who kept them both eating. And they seemed to be really broken up, not about him I don't think, but about losing their meal ticket."

Grassioli dropped the jimmy back into the bag and handed it across the desk to Andy. "That's good enough. We'll have a messenger going down to B.C.I. next week so send the prints along then and a *short* report on the case. Get the report on the back of the print card—it's only the tenth of the month and we're already almost through our paper ration. We should get prints of the bird and the bodyguard to go with it—but the hell with that, there's not enough time. File and forget it and get back to work."

While Andy was making a note on his pad the phone rang: the lieutenant picked it up. Andy wasn't listening to the conversation and was halfway to the door when Grassioli covered the mouthpiece and snapped, "Come back here, Rusch," then turned his attention to the phone.

"Yes, sir, that's right," he said. "There seems no doubt

that it was a break and entry, the killer used the same jimmy for the job. A filed down tyre iron." He listened for a moment and his face flushed. "No, sir, no, we couldn't. What else could we do? Yes, that's S.O.P. . . . No, sir. Right away, sir. I'll have someone get on it now, sir."

"Son of a bitch," the lieutenant added, but only after he had hung up the receiver. "You've done a lousy job on this case, Rusch. Now get back on it and see if you can do it right. Find out how the killer got into the building—and if it really was break and entry. Fingerprint those two suspects. Get a messenger down to Criminal Identification with the prints and have them run through, I want a make on the killer if he has a record. Get moving."

"I didn't know Big Mike had any friends?"

"Friends or enemies, I don't give a damn. But someone is putting the pressure on us for results. So wrap this up as fast as possible."

"By myself, lieutenant?"

Grassioli chewed the end of his stylo. "No, I want the report as soon as possible. Take Kulozik with you." He belched painfully and reached into the drawer for the pills.

Detective Steve Kulozik's fingers were short and thick and looked as though they should be clumsy: instead they were agile and under precise control. He held Shirl's right thumb with firm pressure and rolled it across the glazed white tile, leaving a clear and unsmudged print inside the square marked R THMB. Then one by one, he pressed the rest of her fingers to the ink pad and then to the tile until all the squares were full.

"Could I have your name, miss?"

"Shirl Greene, that's spelled with an *E* on the end." She stared at the black-stained tips on her fingers. "Does this make me a criminal now, with a record?"

"Nothing like that at all, Miss Greene." Kulozik carefully printed her name with a thin grease pencil in the space at the bottom of the tile. "These prints aren't made public, they're just used in conjunction with this case. Could I have your date of birth?"

"October twelfth, 1977."

"I think that's all we need now." He slid the tile into a plastic case along with the ink pad.

Shirl went to wash the ink from her hands, and Steve was packing in the fingerprint equipment when the door announcer buzzed.

"Do you have her prints?" Andy asked when he came in.

"All finished."

"Fine, then all that's left is to get the prints from the bodyguard, he's waiting downstairs in the lobby. And I found a window in the cellar that looks like it was pried open, better check that for latent prints too. The elevator operator will show you where it is."

"On my way," Steve said, shouldering the equipment case.

Shirl came out as Steve was leaving. "We have a lead now, Miss Greene," Andy told her. "I found a window in the basement that has been pried open. If there are any fingerprints on the glass or frame, and they match the ones found on the jimmy, it will be fairly strong evidence that whoever did the killing broke into the building that way. And we'll compare the jimmy marks with the ones on the door here. Do you mind if I sit down——?"

"No," she said, "of course not."

The chair was soft and the murmuring air-conditioner made the room an island of comfort in the steaming heat of the city. He leaned back and some of the tension and fatigue drained away: the door announcer buzzed.

"Excuse me," Shirl said and went to answer it. There was a murmur of voices in the hallway behind him as he flipped the pages in his notepad. The plastic cover was buckled on one of the sheets and some of the lettering was fading, so he went over it again with his stylo, pressing hard so that it was sharp and black.

"You get outta here, you dirty whore!"

The words were screamed in a hoarse voice, rising shrilly like a scraped fingernail on glass. Andy climbed to his feet and jammed the notepad into his side pocket. "What's going on out there?" he called.

Shirl came in, flushed and angry, followed by a thin, grey-haired woman. The woman stopped when she saw Andy and pointed a trembling finger at him. "My brother

dead and not even buried yet and this one is carrying on with another man . . .”

“I’m a police officer,” Andy said, showing her his buzzer. “Who are you?”

She drew herself up, a slight movement that did nothing to increase her height: years of bad posture and indifferent diet had rounded her shoulders and hollowed her chest. Scrawny arms dangled from the sleeves of the much worn, mud-coloured housedress. Her face, filmed now with sweat, was more grey than white, the skin of a photophobic city dweller: the only colouring in it appeared to be the grime of the streets. When she spoke her lips opened in a narrow slit, delivered the words like metal stampings from a press, then closed instantly afterwards lest they deliver one item more than was needed. Only the watery blue eyes held any motion or life, and they twitched with anger.

“I’m Mary Haggerty, poor Michael’s sister and only living relation by blood. I’ve come to take care of Michael’s things, he’s left them all to me in his will, the lawyer told me that, and I have to take care of them. That whore’ll have to get out, she’s taken enough from him . . .”

“Just a minute,” Andy broke into the shrill babble of words and her mouth snapped shut while she breathed rapidly through flared, righteous nostrils. “Nothing can be touched or taken from this apartment without police permission, so you don’t have to worry about your possessions.”

“You can’t say that with her here,” she squawled and turned on Shirl. “She’ll steal and sell everything that’s not nailed down. My good brother . . .”

“Your good brother!” Shirl shouted. “You hated his guts and he hated yours, and you never came near this place as long as he was alive.”

“Shut up!” Andy broke in, coming between the two women. He turned to Mary Haggerty. “You can go now. The police will let you know when the things in this apartment are available.”

She was shocked. “But—you can’t do that. I have my rights. You can’t leave that whore here alone.”

Andy’s patience was cracking. “Watch your language. Mrs. Haggerty. You’ve used that word enough. Don’t forget what *your* brother did for a living.”

Her face went white and she took a half step backward. "My brother was in business, a businessman," she said weakly.

"Your brother was in the rackets, and that means girls among other things." Without her anger to hold her erect she slumped, deflated, thin and bony, the only round thing in her body was her abdomen, swollen from years of bad diet and bearing too many children.

"Why don't you go now," he said. "We'll get in touch with you as soon as possible."

The woman turned and left without another word. He was sorry that he had lost his temper and said more than he should, but there was no way to take back the words now.

"Did you mean that—what you said about Mike?" Shirl asked, after the door had closed. In a plain white dress and with her hair pulled back she looked very young, even innocent, despite the label Mary Haggerty had given to her. The innocence seemed more realistic than the charges.

"How long did you know O'Brien?" Andy asked, fending the question off for the moment.

"Just about a year, but he never talked about his business. I never asked. I always thought it had something to do with politics. he always had judges and politicians visiting him."

Andy took out his notebook. "I'd like the names of any regular visitors, people he saw in the last week."

"Now you are asking the questions—and you haven't answered mine." Shirl smiled when she said it, but he knew she was serious. She sat down on a straight-backed chair, her hands folded in her lap like a schoolgirl.

"I can't answer that in too much detail," he said. "I don't know that much about Big Mike. About all I can tell you for certain is that he was some sort of a contact man between the syndicate and the politicians. Executive level I guess you would call it. And it has been thirty years at least since the last time he was in court or behind bars."

"Do you mean—he was in jail?"

"Yes, I checked on it, he's got a criminal record and a couple of convictions. But nothing recently, it's the punks who get caught and sent up. Once you operate in Mike's

—circle the police don't touch you. In fact they help you—like this investigation."

"I don't understand?"

"Look. There are five, maybe ten killings in New York every day, a couple of hundred felonious assaults, twenty, thirty cases of rape, at least fifteen hundred burglaries. The police are understaffed and overworked. We don't have time to follow up any case that isn't open and shut. If someone gets murdered and there are witnesses, okay, we go out and pick the killer up and the case is closed. But in a case like this, frankly Miss Greene, we usually don't even try. Unless we get a make on the fingerprints and have a record on the killer. But the chances are that we don't. This city has a million punks who are on the welfare and wish they had a square meal or a TV or a drink. So they try their hand at burglary to see what they can pick up. We catch a few and send them up-state on work gangs, breaking up the big parkways with pickaxes to reclaim the farmland. But most of them get away. Once in a while there is an accident, maybe someone comes in while they are pulling a job, surprises them while they are cleaning out the place. If the burglar is armed there may be a killing. Completely by accident, you understand, and the chances are ninety-nine out of a hundred that something like this happened to Mike O'Brien. I took the evidence, reported the case—and it should have died there. It would have if it had been anyone else. But as I said, Big Mike had plenty of political contacts and one of them put on some pressure to make a more complete investigation, and that is why I am here. Now—I've told you more than I should, and you'll do me a big favour if you forget all about it."

"No, I won't tell anyone. What happens next?"

"I ask you a few more questions, leave here, write up a report—and that will be the end of it. Lots of other work is piling up behind me and the department has already put more time into the investigation than it can afford."

She was shocked. "Aren't you going to catch the man who did it?"

"If the fingerprints are on file, we might. If not—we haven't got a chance. We won't even try. Aside from the

reason that we have no time, we feel that whoever did Mike in performed a social service."

"That's terrible!"

"Is it? Perhaps." He opened his notepad and was very official again. He had finished with the questions by the time Kulozik came back with latent prints from the cellar window and they left the building together. After the cool apartment the air in the street hit like the blast from an open furnace door.

VII

It was after midnight, a moonless night, but the sky outside the wide window could not equal the rich darkness of the polished mahogany of the long, refectory table. The table was centuries old, from a monastery long since destroyed, and very valuable, as were all the furnishings in the room: the sideboard, the paintings, and the cut-crystal chandelier that hung in the centre of the room. The six men grouped around the end of the table were not valuable at all, except in a financial sense, although in that way they were indeed very well off. Two of them were smoking cigars, and the cheapest cigar you could buy cost at least ten D's.

"Not every word of the report if you please, Judge," the man at the head of the table said. "Our time is limited and just the results will be all we need." If anyone there knew his real name they were careful not to mention it. He was now called Mr. Briggs and he was the man in charge.

"Surely, Mr. Briggs, that will be easy enough," Judge Santini said, and coughed nervously behind his hand. He never liked these sessions at the Empire State Building. As a judge he shouldn't be seen here too often with these people. Besides, it was a long climb and he had to think about his ticker. Particularly in this kind of weather. He took a sip of water from the glass in front of him and moved his glasses forward on his nose so that he could read better.

"Here is what it boils down to. Big Mike was killed instantly by a blow on the side of the head, done with a

sharpened tyre iron that was also used to break into the apartment. Marks made on a jimmied open basement window match the ones on the door and they both fit the jimmy, so it looks as though whoever did it got in that way. There were clear fingerprints on the iron and on the basement window, the same prints. So far the prints appear to be of a person unknown, they do not match any of the fingerprints on file in the Bureau of Criminal Identification, nor are they the prints of O'Brien's bodyguard or girl friend, the ones who found the body."

"Who do the fuzz think done it?" one of the listeners asked from around his cigar.

"The official view is—ah, death by misadventure you might say. They think that someone was burgling the apartment and Mike walked in and surprised him, and Mike was killed in the struggle."

Two men started to ask questions but shut up instantly when Mr. Briggs began to speak. He had the gloomy, serious eyes of a hound dog, with the matching sagging lower lids and loose dewlaps on his cheeks. The pendant jowls wagged when he talked.

"What was stolen from the apartment?"

Santini shrugged. "Nothing, from what they can tell. The girl claims that nothing is missing and she ought to know. The room was taken apart, but apparently the burglar was jumped before he finished the job and then he ran in a panic. It could happen."

Mr. Briggs pondered over this, but he had no more questions. Some of the others did and Santini told them what was known. Mr. Briggs considered for a while then silenced them with a raised finger.

"It appears that the killing was accidental, in which case it is of no importance to us. We will need someone to take over Mike's work—what is it, Judge?" he asked, frowning at the interruption.

Santini was sweating. He wanted the matter settled so he could go home, it was after one a.m. and he was tired. He wasn't used to being up this late any more. But there was a fact that he had to mention, it might be important and if it was noticed later and it came out that he had known about it and said nothing . . . it would be best to get it over with.

"There is one thing more I ought to tell you. Perhaps it means something, perhaps not, but I feel we should have all the information in front of us before we——"

"Get on with it, Judge," Mr. Briggs said coldly.

"Yes, of course. It's a mark that was on the window. You must understand that all the basement windows are coated with dust on the inside and that none of the others were touched. But on the window that was jimmied open, through which we can presume the killer entered the building, there was a design traced in the dust. A heart."

"Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?" one of the listeners growled.

"Nothing to you, Schlacter, since you are an American of German extraction. Now I am not guaranteeing that it means anything, it may just be a coincidence, meaningless, it could be anything. But just for the record, just to get it down, the Italian word for heart is *cuore*."

The atmosphere in the room changed instantly, electrified. Some of the men sat up and there was a rustle of shifting bodies. Mr. Briggs did not move, though his eyes narrowed. "Cuore," he said slowly, "I don't think he has enough guts to try and move into the city."

"He's got his hands full in Newark. He got burned once coming here, he's not going to try it again."

"Maybe. But he's half out of his head I hear. On the LSD. He could do anything . . ."

Mr. Briggs coughed and they were all quiet on the instant. "We are going to have to look into this," he said. "Whether Cuore is trying to move into our area or whether someone is trying to stir up trouble and blaming it on him; either way we want to find out. Judge, see to it that the police continue the investigation."

Santini smiled, but his fingers were knotted tightly together under the table. "I'm not saying no, mind you, not saying it can't be done, just that it would be very difficult. The police are very short-handed, they don't have the personnel for a full-scale investigation. If I try to pressure them they'll want to know why. I'll have to have some good answers. I can have some people work on this, make some calls, but I don't think we can get enough pressure to swing it."

"You can't get enough pressure, Judge," Mr. Briggs said

in his quietest voice. Santini's hands were trembling now. "But I never ask a man to do the impossible. I'll take care of this myself. There are one or two people I can personally ask to help out. I want to know just what is happening here."

VIII

Through the open window rolled the heat and stench, the sound of the city, a multi-voiced roar that rose and fell with the hammered persistence of waves breaking on a beach; an endless thunder. In sudden punctuation against this background of noise there came the sound of broken glass and a jangled metallic crash: voices rose in shouts and there was a long scream at the same instant.

"What? What . . . ?" Solomon Kahn grumbled, stirring on the bed and rubbing his eyes. The bums, they never shut up, never let you grab a little nap. He got up and shuffled to the window, but could see nothing. They were still shouting—what could have made the noise? Another fire escape falling off? That happened often enough. They even showed it on TV if there was a gruesome picture to go with it. No, probably not, just kids breaking windows again or something. The sun was down behind the buildings but the air was still hot and foul.

"Some lousy weather," he muttered as he went to the sink. Even the boards in the floor were hot on the soles of his bare feet. He sponged off some of the sweat with a little water, then turned the TV on to the Music-Time station. A jazz beat filled the room and the screen said 18:47, with 6:47 P.M. underneath in smaller numerals for all the yuks who had dragged through life without managing to learn the twenty-four-hour clock. Almost seven, and Andy was on day duty today which meant he should have been through by six, though they never left on time. Anyway, it was time to get the chow going.

"For this the army gave me a fine fifteen-grand education as an Aviation Mechanic," he said, patting the stove. "Finest investment they ever made." The stove had started life as a gas burner, which he had adapted for tank gas

when they closed off the gas mains, then had installed an electric heating element when the supplies of tank gas ran out. By the time the electric supplies became too erratic—and expensive—to cook with, he had installed a pressure tank with a variable jet that would burn any inflammable liquid. It had worked satisfactorily for a number of years, consuming kerosine, methanol, acetone and a number of other fuels, balking only slightly at aviation gas while sending out a yard-long streamer of flame that had scorched the wall before he could adjust it. His final adaptation had been the simplest—and most depressing. He had cut a hole in the back of the oven and run a chimney outdoors through another hole hammered through the brick wall. When a solid fuel fire was built on the rack inside the oven, an opening in the insulation above it let the heat through to the front ring.

"Even the ashes stink like fish," he complained as he shovelled out the thin layer of powdery ash from the previous day. These he threw out the window in an expanding grey cloud and was gratified when he heard a cry of complaint from the window on the floor below. "Don't you like that?" he shouted back. "So tell your lousy kids not to play the TV at full blast all night and maybe I'll stop dumping the ashes."

This exchange cheered him, and he hummed along with *The Nutcracker Suite* which had replaced the nameless jazz composition—until a burst of static suddenly interrupted the music, drowning it out. He mumbled curses under his breath as he ran over and hammered on the side of the TV set with his fist. This had not the slightest effect. The static continued until he reluctantly turned the TV off. He was still muttering angrily when he bent to fire up the stove.

Sol placed three oily, grey bricks of seacoal on the rack and went over to the shelf for his battered Zippo lighter. A good lighter that, bought in the PX when?—must be fifty years ago. Of course most of the parts had been replaced since that time, but they didn't make lighters like this anymore. They didn't make lighters at all anymore. The sea-coal spluttered and caught, burning with a small blue flame. It stank—of fish—and so did his hands now: he went and rinsed them off. The stuff was supposed to be made of

cellulose waste from the fermentation vats at the alcohol factory, dried and soaked with a low grade plankton oil to keep it burning. Rumour had it that it was really made of dried and pressed fish guts from the processing plants, and he preferred this to the official version, true or not.

His miniature garden was doing well in the window box. He plucked the last of the sage and spread it out on the table to dry, then lifted the plastic sheeting to see how the onions were doing. They were coming along fine and would be ready for pickling soon. When he went to rinse off his hands in the sink he looked quizzically at his beard in the mirror.

"It needs trimming, Sol," he told his image. "But the light is almost gone so it can wait until morning. Still, it wouldn't hurt none to comb it before you dress for dinner." He ran a comb through his beard a few times, then tossed the comb aside and went to dig a pair of shorts out of the wardrobe. They had started life many years earlier as a pair of Army suntan trousers, and since then had been cut down and patched until they bore little resemblance to the original garment. He was just pulling them on when someone knocked on the door. "Yeah," he shouted, "who is it?"

"Alcover's Electronics," was the muffled answer.

"I thought you died or your place burned down," Sol said, throwing the door open. "It's only been two weeks since you said you would do a rush job on this set—which I paid for in advance."

"That's the way the electron hops," the tall repairman said calmly, swinging his valise-sized toolbox onto the table. "You got a gassy tube, some tired components in that old set. So what can I do? They don't make that tube any more, and if they did I couldn't buy it, it would be on priority." His hands were busy while he talked, hauling the TV down to the table and starting to unscrew the back. "So how do I fix the set? I have to go down to the radio breakers on Greenwich Street and spend a couple of hours shopping around. I can't get the tube, so I get a couple of transistors and breadboard up a circuit that will do the same job. It's not easy I tell you."

"My heart bleeds for you," Sol said, watching suspiciously as the repairman took the back off the set and extracted a tube.

"Gassy," the man said, looking sternly at the radio tube before he threw it into his toolbox. From the top tray he took a rectangle of thin plastic onto which a number of small parts had been attached, and began to wire it into the TV circuit. "Everything's makeshift," he said. "I have to cannibalize old sets to keep older ones working. I even have to melt and draw my own solder. It's a good thing that there must have been a couple of billion sets in this country, and a lot of the latest ones have solid state circuits." He turned on the TV and music blared across the room. "That will be four D's for labour."

"Crook!" Sol said. "I already gave you thirty-five D's . . ."

"That was for the parts, labour is extra. If you want the little luxuries of life you have to be prepared to pay for them."

"The repairs I need," Sol said, handing over the money. "The philosophy I do not. You're a thief."

"I prefer to think of myself as an electronic grave-robbber," the man said, pocketing the bills. "If you want to see the thieves you should see what I pay to the radio breakers." He shouldered his toolbox and left.

It was almost eight o'clock. Only a few minutes after the repairman had finished his job a key turned in the lock and Andy came in, tired and hot.

"Your chunk is really dragging," Sol said.

"So would yours if you had a day like mine. Can't you turn on a light, it's black as soot in here." He slumped to the chair by the window and dropped into it.

Sol switched on the small yellow bulb that hung in the middle of the room, then went to the refrigerator. "No Gibsons tonight, I'm rationing the vermouth until I can make some more. I got the coriander and orris root and the rest, but I have to dry some sage first, it's no good without that." He took out a frosted pitcher and closed the door. "But I put some water in to cool and cut it with some alky which will numb the tongue so you can't taste the water, and will also help the nerves."

"Lead me to it!" Andy sipped the drink and managed to produce a reluctant smile. "Sorry to take it out on you, but I had one hell of a day and there's more to come." He sniffed the air. "What's that cooking on the stove?"

"An experiment in home economics—and it was free for the taking on the welfare cards. You may not have noticed but our food budget is shot to pieces since the last price increase." He opened a canister and showed Andy the granular, brown substance inside. "It is a new miracle ingredient supplied by our benevolent government and called ener-G—and how's *that* for a loathsome cut name? It contains vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates . . ."

"Everything except flavour?"

"That's about the size of it. I put it in with the oatmeal, I doubt if it can do any harm because at this moment I am beginning to hate oatmeal. This ener-G stuff is the product of the newest wonder of science, the plankton whale."

"The what?"

"I know you never open a book—but don't you ever watch TV? They had an hour programme on the thing. A conversion of an atomic submarine, cruises along just like a whale and sucks in plankton, all the microscopic sea things that you will be very surprised to find out the mighty whales live on. All three that's left. The smallest life forms supporting the biggest, there's a moral there someplace. Anyway—the plankton gets sucked in and hits a sieve and the water gets spit out and the plankton gets pressed into little dry bricks and stored in the sub until it is full up and can come back and unload. Then they futz around with the bricks of plankton and come up with ener-G."

"Oh, Christ, I bet it tastes fishy."

"No takers," Sol sighed, then served up the oatmeal.

They ate in silence. The ener-G oatmeal wasn't as bad as they had expected, but it wasn't very good, either. As soon as he was finished Sol washed the taste of it out of his mouth with the alcohol and water mixture.

"What's this you said about more work to come?" he asked. "They have you doing a double shift today?"

Andy went back to the window: there was a bit of air stirring the damp heat now that the sun had set. "Just about, I'm going on special duty for awhile. You remember the murder case I told you about?"

"Big Mike, the gonif? Whoever chopped him did a service to the human race."

"My feelings exactly. But he's got political friends who are more interested in the case than we are. They have

some connections, they pulled a few strings and the commissioner himself called the lieutenant and told him to get a man on the investigation full time and find the killer. It was my name on the report so I caught the assignment. And Grassy, oh, he is a sweet bastard, he didn't tell me about it until I was signing out. He gave me the job then and a strong suggestion that I get on to it tonight. Like now," he said, standing and stretching.

"It'll be a good deal, won't it?" Sol asked, stroking his beard. "An independent position, your own boss, working your own hours, being covered with glory."

"That isn't what I'll be covered with unless I come up with an answer pretty fast. Everyone is watching and they are putting on the pressure. Grassy told me I had to find the killer soonest or I would be back in uniform on a beat in Shiptown."

Andy went into his room and unlocked the padlock on the bottom drawer of the dresser. He had extra rounds of ammunition here, some private papers and equipment, including his issue flashlight. It was the squeeze-generator type and it worked up a good beam when he tested it.

"Where to now?" Sol asked when he came out. "Going to stake out the joint?"

"It's a good thing you're not a cop. Sol. With your knowledge of criminal investigation crime would run rampant in the city——"

"It's not doing so bad, even without my help."

—and we'd all be murdered in our beds. No stake out. I'm going to talk to the girl."

"Now the case gets interesting. Am I allowed to ask what girl?"

"Kid name of Shirl. Really built. She was Big Mike's girl friend, living with him, but she was out of the apartment when he got bumped."

"Do you maybe need an assistant? I'm good at night work."

"Cool off, Sol, you wouldn't know what to do with it if you had it. She plays out of our league. Put some cold water on your wrists and get some sleep."

Using the flashlight, Andy avoided the refuse and other pitfalls of the dark stairwell. Outside the crowds and the heat were unchanged, timeless, filling the street by day and

by night. He wished for a rain that would clear them both away, but the weather report hadn't offered any hope. *Continued no change.*

Charlie opened the door at Chelsea Park with a polite "Good evening, sir." Andy started towards the elevator, then changed his mind and walked on past it to the stairs. He wanted to have a look at the window and the cellar after dark, to see it the way it had been when the burglar came in. If he had entered the building that way. Now that he had been assigned to actually try and find the killer he had to go into all the details of the case in greater depth, to try to reconstruct the whole thing. Was it possible to get to the window from outside without being seen? If it wasn't then it might be an inside job and he would have to go through the staff and the tenants of the building.

He stopped, silently, and took out his gun. Through the half-open door of the cellar ahead he saw the flickering beam of a flashlight. This was the room where the jimmied window was. He walked forward slowly, putting his feet down on the gritty concrete floor with care so that they made no noise. When he entered he saw that someone was against the far wall, playing a flashlight along the row of windows. A dark figure outlined against the yellow blob of light. The light moved to the next window, hesitated, and stopped on the heart that had been traced in the dirt there. The man leaned over and examined the window, so intent in his study that he did not hear Andy cross the floor and come up behind him.

"Just don't move—that's a gun in your back," Andy said as he jabbed the man with his revolver. The flashlight dropped and broke: Andy cursed and pulled out his own light and squeezed it to life. The beam hit full on an old man's face, his mouth open in terror, his skin suddenly as pale as his long, silvery hair. The man sagged against the wall, gasping for air, and Andy put his gun back into the holster, then held the other's arm as he slid slowly down the wall to a sitting position on the floor.

"The shock . . . suddenly . . ." he muttered. "You shouldn't do that . . . who are you?"

"I'm a police officer. What's your name—and what were you doing down here?" Andy frisked him quickly: he wasn't armed.

"I'm a . . . civil official . . . my identification is here." He struggled to produce his wallet and Andy took it from him and opened it.

"Judge Santini," he said, flashing the light from the identification card to the man's face. "Yes, I've seen you in court. But isn't this a funny place for a judge to be?"

"Please, no impertinence, young man." The first reaction had passed and Santini was in control again. "I consider myself knowledgeable in the laws of this sovereign state, and I cannot recall any that apply to this particular situation. I suggest that you do not exceed your authority . . ."

"This is a murder investigation and you may have been tampering with evidence, Judge. That's authority enough to run you in."

Santini blinked into the glare of the flashlight and could just make out his captor's legs; they were in tan pants, not a blue uniform. "You are Detective Rusch?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Andy said, surprised. He lowered the light so that it was no longer shining in the judge's face. "What do you know about this?"

"I shall be happy to tell you, my boy, if you will allow me off the floor and if we could find a more comfortable spot for our chat. Why don't we visit Shirl—you must have made Miss Greene's acquaintance? It will be a bit cooler there, and once arrived I will be happy to tell you all that I know."

"Why don't we do that," Andy said, helping the old man to his feet. The judge wasn't going to run away—and he might have some official connection with the case. How else had he known that Andy was the detective who had been assigned to the investigation? This looked more like political interest than police interest and he knew enough to tread warily here.

They took the elevator up from the basement and Andy's scowl wiped the curious look from the operator's face. The judge seemed to be feeling better, though he leaned on Andy's arm down the length of the hall:

Shirl opened the door for them. "Judge—is something wrong?" she asked wide-eyed.

"Nothing, my dear, just a touch of the heat, fatigue, I'm not getting any younger, not at all." He straightened up, concealing well the effort this required, and moved away

from Andy to lightly take her arm. "I met Detective Rusch outside, he was good enough to come up with me. Now, if I could be allowed a little closer to the cool breath of that air-conditioner and permitted to rest a moment . . ." They went down the hall and Andy followed.

The girl was really good to look at, dressed like something out of a TV spectacular. Her dress was made of a fabric that shone like woven silver—yet appeared to be soft at the same time. It was sleeveless, cut low in the front and even lower in the back, all the way down to her waist, Andy saw. Her hair was brushed straight to her shoulders in a shining, russet wave. The judge looked at her too, out of the corner of his eye as she guided him to the sofa.

"We're not disturbing you, are we, Shirl?" he asked. "You're dressed up tonight. Going out?"

"No," she said, "I was just staying home by myself. If you want the truth—I'm just building up my own morale. I've never worn this dress before, it's something new, nylon, I think, with little specks of metal in it." She plumped a pillow and pushed it behind Judge Santini's head. "Can't I get something cool for you to drink? And you too, Mr. Rusch?" It was the first time she had appeared to notice him, and he nodded silently.

"A wonderful suggestion," the judge sighed and settled back. "Something alcoholic if possible."

"Oh, yes—there are all kinds of things in the bar, I don't drink them." When she went into the kitchen Andy sat close to Santini and spoke in a quiet voice.

"You were going to tell me what you were doing in the cellar—and how you know my name."

"Simplicity itself—" Santini glanced towards the kitchen, but Shirl was busy and couldn't hear them. "O'Brien's death has certain, shall we say, political ramifications, and I have been asked to follow the progress being made. Naturally I learned that you had been assigned to the case." He relaxed and folded his hands over his round belly.

"That's an answer to one half of my question," Andy said. "Now, what were you doing in the cellar?"

"It's cool in here, almost chill you might say after being outside. Quite a relief. Did you notice the heart that had been drawn in the dust on the cellar window?"

"Of course, I was the one who found it."

"That is most interesting. Did you ever hear of an individual—you should have, he has a police record—by the name of Cuore?"

"Nick Cuore? The one who has been muscling into the rackets in Newark?"

"The very one. Though 'muscling in' is not quite correct, in charge, would be more accurate. He has taken over there, and is such an ambitious man that he is even casting his eyes in the direction of New York."

"What does all this suppose to mean?"

"*Cuore* is a good Italian word. It means heart," Santini said as Shirl came into the room carrying a tray.

Andy took the drink with an automatic thank you, scarcely aware of the other's conversation. He understood now why all the pressure was being brought to bear upon this case. It wasn't a matter of pity, no one seemed to really care that O'Brien was dead, it was the *why* of his killing that really counted. Had the murder been a brutal accident as it appeared to be? Or was it a warning from Cuore that he was expanding into New York City? Or was the killing a power move by one of the local people who was trying to put the blame on Cuore in order to cover himself? Once you entered the maze of speculation the possibilities expanded until the only way the truth could be uncovered was by finding the killer. The interested parties had pulled a few strings and his full-time assignment had been the result. A number of people must be reading his reports and waiting impatiently for an answer.

"I'm sorry," he said, aware that the girl had spoken to him. "I was thinking of something else and I didn't hear you."

"I just asked you if the drink was all right. I can get you something else if you don't like that."

"No, this is fine," he said, realizing that he had been holding his glass all this time, just staring at it. He took a sip, and then a second one. "In fact it's very good. What is it?"

"Whisky. Whisky and soda."

"It's the first time I ever tasted it." He tried to remember how much a bottle of whisky cost. There was almost none being made now because of the grain shortage and each

year the stored supplies grew smaller and the price increased. At least two hundred D's a bottle, probably more.

"That was very refreshing, Shirl," Santini said, placing his empty glass against the arm of his chair where it remained, "and you have my most heartfelt thanks for your kind hospitality. I'm sorry I must run along now. Rosa is expecting me, but could I ask you something first?"

"Of course, Judge—what is it?"

Santini took an envelope from his side pocket and opened it, fanning out the handful of photographs that it contained. From where he sat all Andy could see was that they were pictures of different men. Santini handed one over to Shirl.

"It was tragic," he said, "tragic what happened to Mike. All of us want to help the police as much as we can. I know you do too, Shirl, so perhaps you'll take a look at these pictures, see if you recognize any of these people."

She took the first one and looked at it, frowning in concentration. Andy admired the judge's technique for talking a lot and really saying nothing—yet getting the girl's co-operation.

"No, I can't say I have ever seen him before," she said.

"Was he ever a guest here, or did he meet Mike while you were with him?"

"No, I'm sure of that, he's never been here. I thought you were asking if I had ever seen him on the street or anything."

"What about the other men?"

"I've never seen any of them. I'm sorry I can't be of any more help."

"Negative intelligence is still intelligence, my dear."

He passed the photographs to Andy who recognized the top one as Nick Cuore. "And the others?" he asked.

"Associates of his," Santini said as he rose slowly from the deep chair.

"I'll keep these a while," Andy said.

"Of course. You may find them valuable."

"Must you go already?" Shirl protested. Santini smiled and started for the door.

"Indulge an old man, my dear. Much as I enjoy your company, I must keep sensible hours these days. Good night, Mr. Rusch—and good luck."

"I'm going to make myself a drink," Shirl said after she

had shown the judge out. "Can I liven up that one for you? If you're not on duty, that is."

"I'm on duty, and I have been for the last fourteen hours, so I think it is about time that duty and drink mixed. If you won't report me?"

"I'm no ratfink!" She smiled, and when they sat opposite each other he felt better than he had for weeks. The headache was gone, he was cool and the drink tasted better than anything he remembered.

"I thought you were through with the investigation," Shirl said. "That's what you told me."

"I thought so then, but things have changed. There is a lot of interest in getting this case solved. Even people like Judge Santini are concerned."

"All the time I knew Mike I never realized he was so important."

"Alive, I don't think he was. It is his death that is important, and the reasons—if any—for it."

"Did you mean that, what you said this afternoon about the police not wanting anything moved from this apartment?"

"Yes, for the present. I'll have to go through everything, particularly the papers. Why do you ask?"

Shirl kept her eyes on her glass, clutching it tightly with both hands. "Mike's lawyer was here today, and everything is pretty much like his sister said. My clothes, my personal belongings are mine, nothing else. Not that I expected anything more. But the rent has been paid here until the end of August—" She looked up squarely at Andy, "—if the furniture is left here I can stay on until then."

"Do you want to do that?"

"Yes," she said. Nothing more.

She's all right, Andy thought. She's not asking any favours, no tears or that kind of thing. Just spreading her cards on the table. Well, why not? It doesn't cost me anything. Why not?

"Consider it done. I'm a very slow apartment searcher, and an apartment this big will take until exactly midnight on the thirty-first of August to search properly. If there are any complaints refer them to Third Grade Detective Andrew Fremont Rusch, Precinct 12-A. I'll tell the parties concerned to get lost."

"That's wonderful!" she said, jumping happily to her feet. "And it deserves another drink. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't feel right about, you know, selling anything from the apartment. That would be stealing. But I don't see anything wrong with finishing off the bottles. That's better than leaving them for that sister of his."

"I agree completely." Andy said, lying back in the soft embrace of the cushions, watching her delicate and attractive wiggle as she took the glasses into the kitchen. This is the life, he thought, and grinned crookedly to himself, the hell with the investigation. At least for tonight. I'm going to drink Big Mike's booze and sit back on his couch and forget everything about police business for just one night.

"No, I come from Lakeland, New Jersey," she said, "we just moved here to the city when I was a kid. The Strategic Air command was putting in those extra-long runways for the Mach-3 planes and they bought our house and all the other ones nearby and tore them down. It's my father's favourite story, how they ruined his life, and he has never voted for a Republican since and swears he would rather die first."

"I wasn't born here either," he said, and took a sip of the drink. "We came from California, my father had a ranch——"

"Then you're a cowboy!"

"Not that kind of a ranch, fruit trees, in the Imperial Valley. I was just a little kid when we left and I hardly remember it. All the farming in those valleys was done with irrigation—canals and pumps. My father's ranch had pumps and he didn't think it was very important when the geologists told him he was using fossil water, water that had been in the ground thousands of years. Old water grows things just as well as new water, I remember him saying that. But there must have been little or no new water filtering down because one day the fossil water was all used up and the pump went dry. I'll never forget that, the trees dying and nothing we could do about it. My father lost the farm and we came to New York, he was a sandhog on the Moses Tunnel when they were building it."

"I never kept an album," Andy said.

"It's the sort of things girls do." She sat on the couch next to him, turning the pages. In the front were photographs of children, ticket stubs, programmes, but he was only slightly aware of them. Her warm, bare arm pressed against his and when she leaned over the album he could smell the perfume in her hair. He had drunk an awful lot, he realized vaguely, and he nodded his head and pretended to be looking at the album. All he was really aware of was her.

"It's after two, I better get going."

"Don't you want some more kofee first?" she asked.

"No thanks." He finished the cup and carefully set it down. "I'll be around in the morning, if that will be all right with you." He started towards the door.

"The morning is fine," she said, and put her hand out. "And thanks for staying here this evening."

"I should be thanking you for the party, remember I never tasted whisky before."

He meant to shake hands, that was all, to say good night. But for some reason he found her in his arms, his face against her hair and his hands pressed tight to the soft velvet skin of her back. When he kissed her she returned the kiss fiercely and he knew everything would be all right.

Later, lying on the crisp expanse of the bed, he could feel the touch of her warm body at his side and the light stir of her sleeping breath on his cheek. The hum of the air-conditioner seemed to make the night more quiet, covering and masking all the other sounds. He had had too much to drink he realized now, and smiled up at the darkness. So what? If he had been sober he might never have ended up where he was. He might feel sorry in the morning, but at the present moment this felt like the best thing that had ever happened to him. Even when he tried to feel guilty he couldn't: his hand tightened possessively on her shoulder and she stirred in her sleep. The curtains were parted slightly and through the opening he could see the moon, distant and friendly. This is all right, he said, this is all right, over and over again to himself.

The moon burned in through the open window, a piercing eye in the night, a torch in the breathless heat. Billy Chung had slept a little, earlier, but one of the twins had had a nightmare, and woken him up and he had lain there wide awake ever since. If only the man hadn't been in the bathroom—Billy rolled his head back and forth, biting at his lower lip, feeling the sweat beading his face. He hadn't meant to kill him, but now that he was dead Billy didn't care. He was worried about himself. What would happen **when they caught him?** They would find him, that's what the police were for, they would take the tyre iron out of the dead man's head and go over it in their laboratory the way they did, then find the man who had sold it to him . . . His head rolled from side to side on the sweat-dampened pillow and a low, almost voiceless moan was forced between his teeth.

(To be continued)

Note: A subscription will ensure that you do not miss the next instalments—see contents page.

WOLVES

by Rob Sproat

"There! He sees us!"

Morey, on his back in the heather, waking up painfully, can see only an impenetrable grey fog. "I'm blind," he thinks. "I've gone blind!"

He rolls his head to the side and sees the heather, and cackles as he realises that the greyness is a real fog which has come down on him in the night. It is halfpast seven on a September morning and Morey is now trying to remember where he is. The voice again:

"I told you! He has the sight!"

Morey sits up and looks around. He sees his soaking wet overcoat, his legs, his boots, the heather and the mist. There is an empty gin bottle between his feet. He speaks aloud. "You're still drunk," he says to his boots. "Voices! Still drunk, that's your trouble."

Now he is remembering. There was a village. He had to walk the last six miles to it after that damn lorry-driver ditched him miles from anywhere in the wilds of Cumberland. His feet still hurt. How did he get the bottle, though? He was down to his last tanner yesterday afternoon . . . he has almost forgotten the voice. Now it speaks again.

"Yes, there is no doubt. Bring the old one and we shall finish him."

"Why not now? What if he should tell?"

"Do as I say! There is no man within an hour of here, and besides, I can stay to watch him."

There seem to be two of them, and this time Morey has no doubts about having heard them. He is on his feet and looking wildly about him.

"Who's there?" he shouts. "Who are you? I can't see!"

"Sit down," says the voice.

"Why? What do you want? Who are you?"

"Sit down," says the voice menacingly, "or else I shall kill you now."

And Morey knows, as though he had always known, that the voice means it. He is very frightened and has stopped wondering where the gin came from. He sits down.

"What's going on?" he asks. "I don't get it. What's going to happen?"

"I shall keep you here until the old one comes, and then we shall kill you," replies the voice.

There are tears in Morey's eyes. He knows, as though he had always known, that this too is true. But he still only half believes it, and doesn't even half understand. He is very wet and cold, but his shivering is caused more by fear. He knows, he can tell in his blood that something is wrong. The last time he had that feeling was when he was ten. His father went out into the shed that same afternoon and hanged himself. He tries again:

"Look, I'm sorry. I don't get this. What have I done? Why do you want to kill me? I never hurt anybody."

"You must die. You have the sight."

"Eh? What?" says Morey. "No. I'm sorry. I don't understand. I never hurt you. Please."

"You have the sight," snaps the voice impatiently. "You are aware of our presence. You must die."

Morey is very confused. "No, please," he says despairingly, "please tell me. I want to know."

"Silence! The old one is coming."

"But . . ."

"Silence!"

Morey sits shaking his head and mumbling about how he doesn't get it and he never hurt anybody, and what is going on, anyway, and . . .

"This is the one?" A new voice, stronger.

"Yes, old one."

"You are sure he has the sight?"

"Of course I am! I have been talking to him."

"How dare you raise your voice to me! Show respect!"

"I am sorry, old one."

"What do you mean by talking to him? Answer me!"

"I am sorry, old one. He was asking why. I had to tell him we were going to kill him to keep him here. He's very frightened. I thought there was no harm, since he will soon die. I almost feel sorry for him. I thought . . ."

"You thought!"

Morey is on his feet, his head spinning with the voices. He shouts: "Stop it, stop it, shut up! Please, tell me what's going on! How many of you people are there, anyway?"

"Just the three," says a voice.

"Aye, just three," says the old one's voice bitterly.

They sound a bit more tractable than before. Morey decides to try questioning again: "Look, please, just what is happening? Who are you?"

"All right, man," says the old one. "Since you will never tell anyone, and since there is no hurry, I will tell you. You may as well be calm. You cannot escape. Soon, you will see us, and we will kill you. This is because you are aware of us, and mankind must never know we are here."

"No, indeed," agree the other voices. The old one continues, warming to his subject. There is hate and bitterness in his voice. Morey is compelled to listen and say nothing.

"You asked just now how many we were. Once, man, before you and your kind came to the Earth, we were many thousand thousand. Good, the times were very good then, the time of beasts . . .

"Food for us all, we were many and strong . . ."

"Many deaths, bloodlust, fear . . ."

They are all joining in, eager to tell. Morey is unable to speak, he sits like a statue. They continue:

"Death and hate are food and life to us, man. We lived well in the old times, the times of the savage beasts . . ."

"Much killing, oh, it was very good . . ."

Fanatical, thinks Morey, absurdly pleased by the word. You sound fanatical.

The old one is speaking: "Then came mankind, with their organisation, their civilisation, their accursed reason! We fought against them, but they were very many and powerful. We could not prevail against them in the open. They drove away and exterminated the great beasts, they began to banish all hatred and violence, we starved. Now the beasts are few, and us with them. If it were not for the power we have over them, men would have starved us all to death."

Morey finds his tongue: "Power?"

"Yes, man, that is why you shall die. At night, men sleep, and they cannot use their damned reason against us.

We speak to them while their reason sleeps, we speak to the beast that is still a part of man . . ."

"We speak of lust and hate, fear and envy . . ."

"Wars and murders, blood and death . . ."

"And so you must die. You have the sight, and can tell other men of us. Then our power would be gone, for if man's reason is aware of us, our voices are shut out. We would starve . . ."

"No, no, I won't tell anyone," says Morey.

"We will not give you the chance," says the old one, relishing Morey's fear. "Let us tell you of your death, man. Soon you will see us as . . ."

"Wolves!" says one of the others. The old one laughs wickedly. "An old trick," he says. "We learned it long ago, when many men were killed by wolves—they never knew how many sighted ones we killed!" He laughs again.

Morey's nerve is completely gone by now. He is sick in his stomach and he begins to sob. "But you don't have to!" he cries. "You don't have to kill me! I won't tell. I promise!"

"We can take no chances," says the old one. "Soon we shall talk a great war to mankind . . ."

"Yes, soon, soon . . ."

"Many million deaths, all men dead . . ."

"Once more the time of the beasts, we shall be very strong again . . ."

"They must not know of this. You must die. Besides, you are the last one . . ."

"Yes, the last with sight. We made them kill the others, the ones who were too many for us to kill, the ones with strong magic against us . . ."

"We spoke to the sleeping men, they hanged them; burned them . . ."

"Witches, they called them, sorcerers, warlocks, devils—you are the last. It has been nearly a century since we last had to kill. We have been watching you . . ."

They droned on. Morey is not listening, he is remembering. When he was three, he was forever being found talking to empty space. They'll put you away for that, his father had said. The nightmares! As a boy of six and seven and eight, every two or three weeks, he would have them. The voices talking:

"Hate . . . hate . . . hate . . ."

"Kill . . . kill . . . kill . . ."

The awful howling, the running, the blood, the screams, the fangs—the wolves! Always, he would wake sobbing and babbling of wolves. Alfie would jeer from the other bed: "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf . . . ?"

"Old one!" the voice is urgent. "A man is approaching!"

"Take him," says the old one's voice, and then there they are. Three of them, huge and bristling grey, with great teeth in their jaws and murder in their eyes. Morey screams once, then turns and rushes headlong down the slope. They are after him at once, gaining on him effortlessly.

Morey catches his foot in a heather root and falls head over heels down a steep bank. He crashes through a gorse thicket and lands on his stomach in the middle of a rough cart-track. There is an old man wheeling a bicycle up the hill towards him; he carries a battered shotgun. Morey rushes towards him, shrieking: "Shoot them, shoot them, shoot the wolves!"

The old man drops his bike and points his gun straight at Morey. It is the last thing Morey sees before they are on him, snarling and tearing and ripping with those awful fangs . . .

Old Adam is not native-born Cumberland, he came from Poland during the war. This has given him a picturesque turn of phrase and an attitude of profound indifference to the eccentric behaviour of his new countrymen. Nevertheless, he was taken aback when that tramp came shouting and screaming at him, and thought it best to keep the man covered with his gun, just in case. He was even more astonished when the man immediately fell down, clutching his throat and eyes, and writhed about emitting cries of apparent agony. Then when he cautiously rolled the man's limp body face upwards, he found his windpipe and intestines had been savagely torn out. Now, as he pedals down to the village to tell the policeman, Adam grumbles to himself.

"Wolfs?" he says. "Wolfs? I see no wolfs."

— ROB SPROAT

THE FIRST LAST MARTYR

by Peter Tate

I go to buy my morning paper and they are watching me colourfully from the magazine rack. I turn on my lonely television set and they are still there, looking at me, making their noise.

My eyes close at night and primeval faces peer through the thickets of slumber and let me wake exhausted and vengeful to face another day of morning papers and long-hairs jostling me as I walk through town. Jostling me.

Before I go further, I should tell you my name is Hubert Flagg. Not a name of distinction, you must admit. Rather, three syllables which seem to be in direct contradiction. Hu-*bert*. A dull, dull sound. Flagg. A flurry of distant trumpets, a name for a hero in the boy's magazines *Wizard* or the *Rover* or *Wham* or *Hurricane*. Together, they make me. Sometimes, they make me sick.

I tell you my name early on because otherwise you will not know it and I tell you how this—this thing is beginning to eat into me because I have to tell somebody the way it is with me.

Not the least annoying part of it is the ease with which five boys with shoulder-length hair and pock-marked faces have made such a trespass in my life.

Time upon time, I have tried to put a reason to it.

Is it because they are so anti-me, so representative of all that I am not? Often, I view myself in the mirror for shrunken heads above my wash-basin, checking my hair for long ends and my face for pink patches and beginning pimples.

I try to keep myself tidy. No more than that. Is it suddenly wrong to concern oneself with appearance?

I live alone. It is of my own choosing. I abhor the state of constant interruption and attendant fuss and locked-up tongue that goes with company.

I have people all day. Come the evening I need the freedom of solitude like a glass of spring water. Yet these days, it seems, I am never alone. I have changed my lodgings not once but several times and life keeps coming after me, thrusting itself under the door. In four-four time, under the door.

And that might be a reason.

Not just noise but an animosity which has no clear motivation. Youths with hair far down their necks put their shoulders in front of me and behind me and trip me with their great booted feet. Girls with the faces of witches and no modesty, snigger after me.

It took much jostling, much sniggering before I realized the situation. You are with youth or against it. Involvement is forced upon you.

It has been that way only since . . .

Then again, has it? Is it outside me or inside me? Is it people or lack of people? Invasion or claustrophobia?

All questions these days and no answers. I am tiring of my inadequacy yet patient because I am my last hope.

A shined-up morning so black you can see your face in it and the sun painting gentleness into the stark contours of life. I am reacting. I have straightened my back out of its question-mark shape.

The birds are singing as they have always done but noticing them is a revelation. Flowers wink at me from window boxes and walk with me along the other side of the park railings.

I pause on the kerb, waiting for the pedestrian light to flicker and the matchstick man to start moving his legs.

I am halfway across the road when I see the hoarding. It is so mighty that I have to crane and crinkle my neck to take in the full glory of its message.

"They're coming," it shouts in scarlet letters a yard high. "They're almost upon us. The rip-roaring, life-loving, stupendous . . . SADDLEBUMS . . ."

And the five fools gaze down on me, clad in black

leather, crouched astride motor-cycles, a city all misty with speed behind them.

Their engines seem to be revving. They are leaning on their horns. Yet how can they be? And, of course, in truth, they are not.

I am still standing in the middle of the road. The traffic forced to wait hoots and clamours about me.

I scuttle like a crab under a foot for the pavement. I am my usual question-mark shape.

Quickly past the shops, not looking back. The five of them have come down from the hoarding and are watching me, I am sure.

Crazy. It is getting to the stage where . . .

Fluency defies me. I sense finality all around me. I cast my mind ahead of me, but it comes bouncing back as though it has hit a brick wall. More and more often these days, I feel time, life, people, even language, all running away from me so fast that I can't keep pace.

It is going to finish like that. No bombs, no fire, no fall-out.

Something then nothing, daylight then oblivion, darkness before night. And everybody running.

Usually, when I emerge, I myself am running in a place I do not recognize and I have to retrace my steps until the scenes become familiar.

The backdrag is always a regret that viewing 25 years in retrospect, I can see only a straight uninteresting thing—I can never identify it as a road or a passage, or even a rut. All I know is that it is without pinnacle, without climax. It is, perhaps, the banal canal. But the chance has never offered itself. Things don't happen to people like me. And the echo comes back—things don't happen to anybody who doesn't go looking.

Regularly, I am taken with an urgency to be active, to be able to say sometime that I have done something that is of benefit to somebody . . . frustration is making my mind untidy, blunting my word power . . .

"Why the hell can't I be specific????"

I spoke out loud. I let people know.

Commuters marching alongside me, passing the business houses with their minds turned inwards on their own thoughts are startled into looking at me. I can feel their

gaze and I flush with it. I stop to look in a window so they can move on. It doesn't help that the window displays lingerie.

It is not until I reach the store where I work—the girl assistants are excited and extra giggly this morning; perhaps they crossed the same crossing; perhaps there are more hoardings—and take my place among the brocade and synthetic spider-web in the upholstery department that I start to relax.

The bolts, the bales of material, looped and twisted in my careless artistry are as I have left them. They are every morning. They will be tomorrow and the next morning. In these terms, I can think about a future.

Gibson, the store supervisor, is around early. I have barely laid out the change in my till when he is leaning over the counter, breathing professional intimacy.

"Hubert," he says. "I know I can rely on you. All these girls. They're so young. And besides, they wouldn't appreciate . . ." He puts on his pained look.

"But you know what I want. Twenty-five years after Dunkirk you know. Now the Board want a special window display. Are you with me?"

I nod assent.

"What I want from you is some nice red, white and blue material, patriotic looking, the sort of stuff they made medal ribbons out of. Can you do that?"

I nod again.

"Stupid idea, really," says Gibson. "Who wants to remember? I am supposed to arrange uniforms, paintings of battles, guns. Guns—in our windows. They have even told me to provide ammunition. And not just blanks. The real thing. As if the people who look at it will know the difference. But the Board wants maximum authenticity. Do you know what they said?"

He leans closer. I look suitably quizzical.

"They told me 'People must know that this stuff is real and they must be frightened. They must realize that it can do damage. They must be made to feel that it should never be used again.' Well, I put it to you—isn't that asking too much of a window?"

I hope my clucking sounds convey sympathy or some close substitute, because I do not feel it.

Gibson's concept of leadership is simple and gains him a lot more success than it is worth. Every day the management gives him hell, he says, but he never betrays his people. In an otherwise smoothly-running organization, Gibson's perpetual torment at first struck me as odd then later, in the full light of revelation, as downright false.

Primarily, I felt dislike. Then it turned to pity, because burning oneself up with hate is a waste of everything.

And yet here I am, despising . . .

So they come back. I shall reel in my kite of a mind and open my ears to the prattling Gibson.

" . . . and it will be my fault, I suppose, if the thing doesn't work out. It'll come back to me. I'm sure my people don't realize what a hazardous position mine is. If they did, they'd try to help me more . . . like you, Hubert"—as an afterthought.

"Life is tough for you Mr. Gibson. I don't know how you stand it."

Perhaps the £2,000 a year helps. One of these days Gibson, I'll call you a bastard. But not till I'm ready to say goodbye.

I smiled benignly.

"I'll look out that material for you. I'll let you have it by the end of the afternoon."

It is as I delve into my stocks, with my mind full of the window and the way the drapes should hang to suggest gallantry yet folly that I take a certain decision, or rather the decision takes me.

A strange decision, complex and immense. It is a decision that keeps me happy for the rest of the afternoon and even makes me chuckle when I stop to view the Saddlebums, safely back on their paper pedestal, as I stroll home, flowers alongside me all the way.

Saturday, November 28—I make a note of it on my diary. That gives me three weeks and three days. I must ask Gibson. I write "Ask Gibson" and underline it.

"It'll be there until we replace it with the Christmas stuff," says Gibson. "New display starts on Monday, November 30. Why?"

"Just curious. Sometimes, we get a run on the red for Santa Claus outfits."

"You'll have it back for that. By the way, do you want to know what they said about Christmas this year?"

But I do not.

"I want the gear," the intense young man told the salesman in Toptogs. "The real thing. I want no near-gear."

He did not miss the flicker of contempt in the man's quick appraisal.

"You boys have a language all your own," said the man. "What you mean is—you don't want anything that's under your arm."

"You could put it that way," said the serious one. "But etymology doesn't cover my back. I'll tell you something, daddy—is that out of date, daddy?—words are part of the identity. Know what I mean? Somebody could come in here tomorrow and give you a description of me you wouldn't recognize. But if they mentioned 'near-gear', you'd know just like that. True?"

"You're right," said the salesman. "At least, I think you're right."

"Then enough of the badinage," said the customer. "I want a black corduroy jacket with six buttons and one pocket at the breast, a black glossy silk shirt which I shall point out to you, a black leather pull-over with a gold guitar-bearing stud in the breast pocket, a tie I shall select from your impeccable stock, and black barathea trousers with the legs no more than 14 inches wide at the base. Oh, and black satin shoes. Do I make myself understood?"

He wandered among the racks of the store and the salesman wandered behind him.

"I will bring my selection to you," he said. "I will not run away with it. I will bring it to you."

"It is no trouble," said the salesman. "You might want to know a price, or see your choice in a wrong size. My intention is to serve you."

"Your intention is to ensure that I don't get away with anything," said the young man. "You don't just change your attitude because I look as though I might spend some money, or at least, you shouldn't."

"My attitude?" The salesman attempted bewilderment. "I have no attitude. I merely sell clothes."

"You won't sell any to me unless you stop following me around."

The salesman stopped. He went back to the main shop area, but to a point where he could watch the customer's every move.

The young man passed along the jacket rack. He removed a dozen jackets from their hangers and left them all draped over chairs before he made his selection.

He considered the outfit in the Toptog mirror-room and saw that it was good. And he separated the darkness into a series of Toptog boxes and set the light about his shoulders. And the darkness he called "gear" and the light "clothes".

"Remember," he said, as he left Toptogs "near-gear."

"Queer-gear," said the salesman.

"Have-no-fear gear," said the intense one, and slapped away the man's supercilious smile in a gesture of such violence that he worried momentarily that his dedication might be splitting his personality.

It was hard to give an age to the storekeeper. His skin had the texture of parchment torn from the curling volumes which lay in wordy mountains about the place, erupting dust at each uncareful step. He wore mildew like a cosmetic.

He drooped at the shoulders and his clothes kept on drooping down to his feet. They would have drooped further, mused the young man in the black corduroy jacket, only whoever heard of drooping feet. And the clothes. He has had a million meals and his waistcoat hasn't missed a single course—or vice versa.

The man turned snake's eyes on him.

"Yes." It was more like a rattle than a voice, like something dry stirring at the bottom of a cage.

"I want a guitar-case," said the young man in the black barathea trousers.

"A case? We have some very fine guitars."

The old man moved behind the counter. He did not seem to be walking, or sitting. He was more suspended, like something in a bottle. Did time come in bottles?

"Just the case."

"It is impossible. Every guitar has a case, every case a guitar. Nice and tidy. We could not spoil the arrangement."

The young one paused.

"The thing is," he said, "I already have a guitar."

"I am sorry . . ."

"Suppose I bought a guitar and case . . . Would you buy back the instrument?"

"It would depend on the condition . . ."

"Well . . . you would know the condition."

"Not sufficient. Not sufficient. Once you buy it, out of my hands. New deal. As though I had never seen it before."

"I'll risk it."

He watched the old man's face: the eyes fascinated him. They were cold and dead. They could have been pickled. Jars again. And there were no eyelids.

He watched them until it became an embarrassment. There were no eyelids.

The old man swung a guitar-case onto the counter and opened it. "Nice case," he said. "Nicely-tuned guitar."

The young man looked down on the decaying Hofner.

"Never mind the guitar," he said. "How much?"

"Five pounds."

The man took the money and stuffed it somewhere under the counter.

"Right. Now, I've got a guitar for sale. It's in good condition—nicely tuned . . ."

Somewhere in the ruin of a face, there might have been a smile.

"No sale. If you knew how many guitars I have here . . . They just don't sell. Only the cases."

The young man wanted to catch hold of the dealer and shake him, but he was suddenly afraid the ancient would crumble to dust in his grasp.

"Niftily done," he said, instead. "Tell me—how do you blink?"

The unsettling element of my plan is that I have to justify it to myself with a regularity that makes for doubt.

It would be simple to be able to say that I have made

a decision in sound mind and sobriety and am determined to abide by it. I have tried to dismiss my qualms in just such a manner but I am ever-conscious that it is the easy way round the problem.

My conscience will not accept platitudes. It must have proof of necessity.

This is a major step. And my intention, though it seems right to me if I consider it long enough, could just as easily be wrong. How much of it, for instance, is prompted by myself as an individual and how much by the wider interests, the ideal that makes me think of it as a mission, rather than one man's way of dealing with a crisis. The question is, how sane and sober am I? . . .

On the night of Friday, November 27, with the draughts of the apartment chilling my feet with misgivings, I have thought again about the Saddlebums.

I switch on the television and they are there.

I consider the plain, plain faces of the watching girls and the nauseous meanderings of their features into an ecstasy that is carnivorous, approaching bestiality.

Coitus interruptus with stereophonic sound. The profundity of the observation amuses me. But as I hold it up for inspection by my mind's eye, the very wretchedness of the condition provides the *raison d'être*. It is necessary, my plan, for everybody's sake.

The window is clear, with the reminders of the two great wars to end all wars piled untidily in a corner.

At any time now, Gibson will begin to voice his displeasure at the work ahead.

"I suppose we ought to dress the window tonight," he says before I have finished my thought. "I hate staying late on Saturdays. But the Board wants the window dressed."

I stage a pause to give Gibson the impression that I am considering something.

Then I say, "Look, Mr. Gibson. I haven't anything planned for tomorrow. Why don't I come in?"

His relief is beautiful to behold.

"Well, could you? I mean, the new display here is

mostly your responsibility, anyhow" . . . nasty fellow, the way he makes a kind gesture sound like a duty . . . "You know what I want. Nice, warm colours. Round-the-hearth stuff. You know . . ."

"I might as well lock up as well, if it will help you. Perhaps I'll set out a few colours tonight. I'm in no particular hurry."

Gibson, bowler intact, scarf carefully guarding his mouth against the cold, pauses at the side-door and looks back.

"You won't forget, will you? I mean—you won't let anything keep you away. The Board would be very annoyed if that window wasn't dressed Monday morning first thing . . ."

"I'll be here."

"Well, goodnight, then." The side-door starts to close.

I move over to it. I smile obligingly as Gibson relinquishes the handle and steps into the home-going torrent.

"Gibson!"

The supervisor turns back to me. The multitude buffets him to and fro. He looks little-boy irritated.

"Gibson, you're a bastard."

Hubert Flagg, on a certain momentous night, watched the usherette tear his ticket in half and then followed her to his seat next to the gangway. He put the guitar-case on the floor beside him, clear of curious feet.

The air about him was tumbling with soprano voices. He was shuddered in by shrill adolescence and overmuch scent. The girl next to him was sweating visibly and wretchedly. She did not even look at him as he sat down.

She was watching the ribbon of illumination at the base of the red velvet curtain. When the lights began to dim, she screamed. All around him, girls drew in their breath, licked painted lips and prepared to begin the ritual.

He suffered a blizzard of excitement in his stomach. It loosened his bowels.

He sat quietly and waited until the irritation overcame him. He went to the toilet, taking the guitar-case with him.

Three or four girls watched him up the gangway and

almost moved to speak to him. One even touched the sleeve of his black corduroy jacket.

He wondered why. Then he remembered the guitar-case.

Surely they didn't. He grinned mirthlessly at the irony.

When he returned, the audience was on its feet, swaying like a field of darkling corn before a loud storm wind.

Police and strong-arm men stood in a line across the front of the stage. He counted them. Twenty-four. He glanced behind him. Stray light glinted on uniforms in the darkness at the rear of the auditorium.

A group was making the appearance of music on-stage. He had to look hard before he was sure they were not the Saddlebums. Their hair, if anything, was longer. Their sound was inaudible.

He sat down and put his hands over his ears. Down here, on a level with the stamping feet and heaving buttocks, he felt a temporary remoteness from the babble at head-height. Soon it would turn to claustrophobia and he would have to stand himself, beating away the suffocation with his hands.

His black satin shoe stubbed the guitar-case and the qualms came back.

Was he to judge? Was he to decide? His indetermination annoyed him. He knew if he did not settle his mind or at least find the strength to disregard the doubt, his chance would be gone.

The girl next to him was crying, her hair streaked against her face by tears. Her breath was coming hard through gritted teeth. But she did not sit down. She stood pantomimed with her hands. There was something phallic, unclean about the movements.

The noise battered at his ears. His stomach was churning. His black shirt clung to him and his trousers were wringing wet about his thighs.

He wanted to scream. He stood and screamed and nobody turned to look at him. He sat down. His head was pounding and his knees were fast turning to liquid. If he did not stand up soon, he would not stand up at all.

A pause came on the brink of bedlam. Out of the vortex, a nasal mid-Atlantic drawl was saying, "Now we're close on the high spot of the evening. Back behind

these curtains are five boys who have become a sensation, a vital way of life. Do you want them? Let me hear you say you want them. We want the Saddlebums, we want the . . ."

The chant was taken up in every corner and recess of the theatre. Hubert Flagg's head lolled. The chant became a club to his brain. "We want the bums," he muttered, his face wrecked and running with perspiration.

"And here they are . . . the SADDLEBUMS . . ."

The curtains flew wide and four of the five came forward. The fifth sat, morose, behind his glittering drum-kit.

The hysteria was tearing at Hubert's ear drums. His nerves were wailing within him. He felt he was dragging, dragging a nail down a tall blackboard.

He reached down and unfastened the locks of the guitar-case. The lid fell away. Hubert's left thumb freed a catch.

He stood up with the sten-gun in his hands and stepped quickly into the centre of the aisle.

Dark heads cavorted before the stage, but the Saddlebums were perched high. He squeezed the trigger in a continuous burst and watched them fall and lie twitching. An amplifier exploded into flames. "Somebody has to judge," he was screaming. "Somebody has to act."

In the hush, only the sten-gun chattering a moral, lecturing until the clip emptied.

And the forces of depravity fell upon him and bore him to the ground. The sound of agony and death was in a thousand throats and the foot apparel rose and fell and the fingers took and tore. There was pain and there was no pain, light and darkness and life running away too fast, too fast. There arose a great wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The police moved forward; the police drew back. An inspector was cursing.

"Give them ten minutes," he told his men. "Let them settle down. What the hell can we do? Phone for ambulances. At least, they can help us clear up the mess."

Slowly, dazedly, the mob began to recede with clothing disarrayed and blood smeared on legs and feet. A girl was clutching something, her eyes wild and the red juice

of it spilling over her shirt and bell-bottom jeans. A policeman reached for her prize and she bared her teeth.

The inspector started forward, striking out to clear the way. Girls lay where he had thrown them and let their noise die down to a sob, to a snuffle.

With a sergeant beside him, he looked down on the body, crushed and torn asunder. It smelt as though the abdominal wall had split. Thank God for a black leather jacket, he thought, and choked on the thought.

The sergeant covered the body with his cape. He picked up the sten-gun, replaced the safety catch and removed the clip. So much he could do because it was routine. But an explanation evaded him. He had seen death before, self-inflicted, caused by outside forces. There was something about this that defied categorisation in his policeman's mind. "What was he?" he asked nobody in particular. "Some kind of bloody martyr?"

— PETER TATE

We are often asked for some really chilly horror. Try this.

DISENGAGEMENT

by T. F. Thompson

From the diary of Doctor Theosophus Dog, April 24th, 1975.

Poor creature! Again and again I think I have succeeded in stifling heart and concentrating on head. Then, just when I think I have succeeded in becoming professionally cold and clinical, something like this comes up and it is as bad as ever. Still, I suppose that pity is a precious thing and perhaps in the long run we would be worse scientists if we succeeded in cutting it right out. It has certainly been present in this case. As I said at the beginning—poor creature. It is somehow worse, infinitely worse, when it happens to a thing so beautiful. And Sadie Smith is one of the most beautiful creatures that ever lived. Strange that her face escaped all damage.

In the mind of Sadie Smith:

Darling gorgeous Bill. Great big hunk of perfectly sweet utterly sexy hunk of great big perfectly sweet manhood. To think he's to be mine. What will it be like I wonder. Bed. Better not think of that. Isn't my wedding dress divine? Oyster satin. Mummy has her good points. Wonder how I'll get on with his mother? Frightens me. Don't be frightened silly goose. He'll be yours. Your husband. Husband. Funny word. Frightening too.

Husband in bed. Shivery delicious. Hope he'll be rough with me. Sadistic. Now stop it, you shameless girl. And everybody thinks you're so sweet. Well I am really. I'm not saying it to anybody except myself. Wish it weren't going to be such a big reception. Wonder whether I'll be any good as a Cabinet Minister's wife. Fancy having the Prime Minister at one's wedding. Bill's going to be Prime Minister one day. I'll see to it, whatever I have to do. I'll do anything. Anything? Steady on Sadie old girl. Well,

almost anything. Wonder if I'll be nervous, wonder if I'll lose my voice and not be able to say 'I do.' . . .

Dr. Dog's diary.

If the Minister of Health hadn't put the pressure on I wouldn't have tried it. It was nonsense from the beginning. Why does one succumb, against one's professional judgment, to moral pressure from someone who can do one favours? A little bit of professional conceit involved too, perhaps. Did I think, in my innermost heart that I might do something? Perhaps that was it. Everybody acknowledges that Dr. Dog is the world's most brilliant brain specialist. Nobel prize winner. They think he can work miracles. So he thinks he can, too. But he was wrong. Of course he was. I knew I couldn't save the girl. Not unless my name had been spelled backwards. Then it would be possible. (You want to watch that old joke about your name Theo, my boy. You'll be getting to believe it.) Still I tried. It wasn't really because the Minister of Health pressured me. Or because the poor little thing's husband is a Cabinet Minister. It was his agony. Couldn't stand his agony. To be deprived of a bride so lovely on one's wedding day. . . .

The mind of Sadie Smith.

I do. I do. I do. I do. Oh the gorgeousness of it. I did it. I've made it. I'm in. Sadie Thorpe. Mrs. Thorpe. 'Darling I'd like you to meet Sadie Thorpe. Her husband's something terribly important in the Government.' Won't it be fun. Absolute fun. Nobody can take him away from me now. Oh God, I wish it were tonight. I don't think I'll be able to last out. Oh well. Better go down to the reception and get it over with.

Dr. Dog's diary.

I wonder at what point one could say that she died? At the moment of the crash? When her heart failed in the operating theatre? When it failed the third time? When they switched her over to the heart lung machine? When I started my hopeless attempt to work a miracle? When I began the deep-freeze surgery? When I connected her brain to the Dog-White cerebralogram? Or this morning

when I finally decided to stop a pointless programme? Or is she not dead? Will she die tomorrow when we switch off and the undertaker puts the mortal, the pathetically mortal remains of Sadie Smith in the coffin? Any of these points in time will do for the death certificate. But it won't necessarily be true. Doesn't bear thinking too closely about that. One is working too near the frontier between life and death for comfort. . . .

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

Thank God that's over. How hateful one's friends are at one's wedding reception. And what a dirty mind the Prime Minister had with three glasses of champagne inside him. I could have him any time I wanted. Sadie, you horrid little bitch. Fancy thinking thoughts like that on your wedding night. When you're within a couple of hours of going to bed with your husband. Sorry darling. Don't do it again. Well I was only being a teeny-weeny bit unfaithful in my mind. I wouldn't do it in reality. Not for a very long time anyway, after he's been unfaithful lots of time. What a lot of silly nonsense you think to yourself Mrs. Thorpe. Course you won't be unfaithful. Ever. A gorgeous, fabulous sex life with Bill and four beautiful children all like him. That's enough for you. Darling Bill. I do love you. He looks awfully tired leaning against the side of the car. A bit tight too. Suppose I am. Glad neither of us have to drive. Not very fit for it. That chauffeur's got a rather sexy profile. He's driving fast. Good. Like driving fast. Thank God we haven't far to go. Wonder if I should be outrageous with Bill when I get him alone. Reach out my hands and—better not. He might be shocked. Better not start off on the wrong foot. On wrong hand. Sadie, my child, you'll have to do something about your mind. It's getting just like a sewer. Wonder if I'll be any good as a wife. Wonder if—*Ahhhhh! Crash! Coloured lights. Pain. Darkness. Oblivion.*

Dr. Dog's diary.

In just twelve hours, if I decide, there will be nothing left of Sadie Smith. I'm not taking a decision over life or death, because she is already dead. But I'm switching off something pretty close to it. There is something still present.

The electroencephalogram is recording it. There is still something left of Sadie Smith. It will all go when I switch off the D-W cerebralogram. What a fantastic waste. I believe she's to be cremated. Her poor mangled body will be no loss. Good riddance. But what a tragedy that the brain has to go too. If this were Nazi Germany, of course, it wouldn't happen. She's no good to anyone else. . . . They'd let me keep her. . . .

And when one comes to think of it, a very powerful moral case can be made out for keeping her. Who knows how many damaged brains might benefit from my work if I can get where I'm going? Who knows how many Sadie Smiths might be saved if . . . I hardly dare write it, yet I know it is there in my mind. It has been there for a week, though I have never acknowledged it. Why should I throw away the finest experimental tool I have ever had? *A human brain*, not a monkey's or a dog's. What might I not learn from it? What suffering might be avoided if I seize this opportunity and make use of this windfall? I can't keep Sadie Smith. Knowing that it is hopeless, not even for research and future humanity can I keep her poor husband dangling on the string of hope. If I am to do this, it must be after Sadie Smith is dead. Not difficult. After all, the brain is already completely disconnected from the rest of the body. A simple piece of surgery and the undertakers can have the remains. Why should not I, and therefore suffering humanity, have the brain when its only other future is to be consumed in the crematorium furnace. It's wrong, you bloody mad fool, utterly wrong. It's morally outrageous. Your eternal soul will be damned. But you know you are going to do it, don't you, Theosophus bloody Dog!

The Mind of Sadie Thorpe.

Bill . . . where are you Bill. Help me . . . oh the pain . . . oh the pain . . . a sea of pain . . . floating . . . help me. Dear God help me. . . . Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet. . . . Mummy. I've got a tooth ache. . . . Prime Minister . . . marriage . . . Bill . . . bed . . . Ogod, the pain. . . .

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

Oh God. I wish I hadn't. It's done. The lies told. The

distracted husband soothed. And he made it so much worse by thanking me pathetically for all my efforts. The body gone—what unobservant obsequious creatures undertakers are. Why, oh why did I give in to the temptation? I am not the stuff of which criminals are made. Or martyrs. I can't really subdue all else to the overpowering needs of stark words like 'My Work' or 'Suffering Humanity.' I have violated this child as evilly as though I had raped her under a drug. Worse. I have raped her in a way no other wicked man ever imagined before. Whatever there is of mind or Id in Sadie Thorpe, I have stolen. What of the moral aspect of this? How can I square this with my beliefs? What of the mockery of the burial service? That is not Sadie Thorpe they will cremate tomorrow. She is here. A gently pulsating sponge in my laboratory. But why should I torture myself like this? I *am* doing it for humanity. I shall bring life and sanity to countless people in return for this one little sin. (This one enormous sin, Dog, let us get it right). Yet is it so awful? As a scientist I knew that she was dead. I know that this thing I have retained is simply an engine kept ticking over by my valves and tubes and plasma flows. GOD DAMN YOU, WON'T YOU EVER ACCEPT MAN THAT THIS IS A SCIENTIFIC TOOL BEYOND PRICE, AND NOTHING MORE!

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

What time is it? It hurts. Oh the pain, the pain, the pain. Where am I? Switch off the pain. Give me a drink. Help. I'm hurt. Help. Bill. Come to bed darling. Pain....

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

I am shocked that Spence took it so calmly. The man is inhuman. No sense of shame. Overcome with excitement at the scientific prospects. I suppose the moral side of it never occurred to him. Still he's the most brilliant assistant I have ever had. No one else needs to know now. Just Spence and myself.

Now we can start work....

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

I've been ill. Or asleep. I've had horrible dreams. And awful pain. But it's over now. My head is clearing now.

Oh God! Where am I? What's happened to me? Aaaaaah! What's happened to my voice. I screamed in my mind but nothing came. Dear God, let me wake up from this nightmare soon. Where am I? What has happened to my eyes? And my ears? I can't move my body. I'm not breathing. Please let me wake up. *Please.* Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah! *Aaaaaah!* Where am I?

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me. What a wonderful programme stretching before us . . . Spence, Sadie and myself. Strange how quickly one gets hardened. My conscience has almost given up the struggle. And yet I still call the specimen Sadie. . . .

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

It's no good my girl. You'll never get out of this nightmare by screaming and panicking. You might go out of your mind, that's all. (What if I am? What if that's what it is all about? But I'm not. I know I am not. I don't feel mad. And I'm not the mad sort.) All right, then let's try logic. Let's do a Sherlock Holmes. Now, Dr. Watson, let's do a reconstruction of the crime shall we? Let's go back to the beginning. Certainly Sherlock, if you think that will help. I do. What do you remember about yourself? My name is Sadie Smith, aged 26, only daughter of a wealthy company director, Roman Catholic, pretty. Met and fell in love with one Bill Thorpe, a pretty important man in politics. He proposed. We married and the Prime Minister came to the wedding. So far so good. What then? Very boring reception, Prime Minister pinched my bottom. Finally escaped. Set off in a chauffeur-driven car for our honeymoon at Bill's country place near Saffron Walden. Now we're coming to it, Sherlock old girl. Now we're coming to it. What happened next? I can't remember. Oh God, I can't remember. Just a red flash of pain and that's all. What happened? What was it? Nothing after that except pain and darkness, pain and darkness and nightmare. And now the mists have cleared. I can think clearly but I can't see, I can't hear, I can't smell, I can't breathe, and I can't properly feel my body. It's as if I only existed inside my brain. What can it all mean? There must be a logical answer

to it if I could only think. But what? How can I exist without breathing. Without using any of my senses. There is an explanation . . . one explanation. But it can't be, can it? Or can it? That flash of pain. The car crashed . . . and . . . I . . . died. Died. Am I dead? Is that it? It must be so. Live people breathe. Live people see and hear and touch. They wiggle their toes. They make love—Oh dear God, if I'm dead I'll never go to bed with Bill, never touch his body, never surrender my body to his. Please not that! It's only a dream. . . . If . . . I'm . . . DEAD . . . where . . . am . . . I? Yes! I know now. It all fits into place. I'm in HELL. After all they were right! There is a Hell and a Heaven. But why should they put me here? Hey! You in charge! You've put me in the wrong place. I'm Sadie Smith. I'm not bad! Not really bad. You've boobed. Please . . . oh please . . . is anybody listening?

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

The experiment is proceeding beyond my most sanguine hopes. There is clearly much activity going on in the specimen. We have had some interesting wave patterns from induced stimuli. Spence's latest rig will soon be ready. Then we shall see.

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

There is only one thing for it. They have put me in Hell because in my heart I did not believe. Hail Mary, Mother of God! Forgive me. I knew not what I did. Oh Mother of Jesus, it was a grievous sin, I know, but please intercede for me. I never imagined Hell would be like this. That Hell should be in our own mind, literally, is beyond standing. Won't you forgive me? At least stop the pains dear God. I never knew there was so much pain. Pain that rises and rises and bursts until I faint. Then it stops. I know it was an awful sin not to believe, but forgive me God, a miserable sinner. There it comes again. The pain. The pain. *Aaaaaah!*

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

Thank God I had the courage to do it. I can truly say now that the theft of Sadie will be of unmeasurable benefit to humanity. Spence is even more excited than I am. There

is no faint doubt that our experiments have put us within striking distance of at least three cerebral disorders. But I wish I felt happier. I wish I could forget. I wish I could treat her as simply another specimen in a bottle. Which is all she is! ! ! How she has made me suffer in these seven months.

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

If only there was some way of measuring time in Hell. If only I knew how long I have been here. Of course it is fantastic how one can develop one's mind if that is all one possesses. If anybody had told me before this that I could construct a while life for myself entirely within my mind, how I would have laughed. If anybody had suggested that I could construct whole crossword puzzles and *see* them in my mind's eye, how crazy such a thought would have seemed. If anybody had told me I could construct a mental clock and a mental calendar to tick off the days and the nights. How long have I been in Hell now? Two hundred and thirty years, nine months, three weeks and two days. I make it July 2nd now. But, of course, I'm not sure. I know my date is not even accurate. How long have been my periods of madness? How many hours, or days, or years, have *They* kept my mind wandering in delirium? How can I ever tell? But I know that *They* did it to me. I didn't go mad myself. I know that. I know that I never will. Even if it is for ever . . . which I expect it will be. But why do they do it to me? Why do they want to make me mad? Why do they want my mind to wander? Why do they give me these days of indescribable pain? Why should the punishment for small sins be so everlasting vast (Hail Mary, Mother of God)? And when it is so terrible, the punishment I mean, why don't they give us better warning of what we are risking while there is time for us to avoid it? It isn't a fair world, whoever constructed it or runs it. Not even to let us into any of the secrets even after we are dead is the meanest thing of all. Utterly mean. Utterly. I wonder what I shall eat tonight? I think I'll have something simple. I'm a little tired as I've been on my feet all day. I think I'll do myself a nice light chive omelette, with a green salad. Don't think I can even bother to make a French dressing tonight. It's scarcely worth the bother.

Then a little fruit, and a cup of coffee. Then I think I'll give Bill a ring and talk to him. So long as we can talk to each other, each in our private hell, it makes things bearable. I don't think we'll make love tonight. I'm too tired. And we mustn't do it too often. Can't afford to get bored with that—and one can get bored with it if one does it too regularly, even if it is only in one's imagination. And what shall I do after that? Shall I write another chapter of my novel, or shall I take a book to bed with me? I suppose I really ought to answer Mummy's letter. She'll be getting quite worried if she doesn't hear from me soon. . . .

Dr. Dog's diary.

It seemed an impossible task when Spence first suggested it a year ago, but we really are on the track now. I think we have already isolated two of the sense channels. The possibilities do not bear thinking of . . .

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

Haven't I suffered enough? Whoever is there, whoever is doing this to me, haven't you done enough? Surely I am not important enough to take up so much of your time and effort? Do you realize how awful the pain is? Do you know what you are doing to me? I suppose you do. That is what omnipotence is, I imagine. But how can you be so cruel? In the hundreds of years you've kept me here, I've built up a new life for myself. I know that it is all imaginary. I know that it is a species of madness, but it keeps me sane if you'll pardon the Irishism. I know that I don't cook meals, or visit friends, or sunbathe, or make love to Bill. I know that I have no body, and no ears, or eyes, or voice, or anything else outside this mind. But a mind is a wonderful thing, a tool of infinite scope, with infinite stretch in it. Do you know, I can recite, without a hesitation, every word of every poem I have written since I've been here, and almost every word of my novel. And I can remember a great deal of this imaginary life I have lived, with the utmost clarity, right down to the tremble on the wing of a Red Admiral butterfly I imagined during one happy summer afternoon on the river with Bill. I don't ask much . . . not any more. Just to be left alone without pain, to be left to exist within myself. But you can't leave me

alone, can you? Is it that a human being is a piece of metal that has to be tested and twisted, stretched and crushed, heated and frozen, dipped in acids, burned with roaring flames, hammered and pinched until its breaking point is reached? Is that what this is all about? I was so happy—well not happy—but I was resigned to the world I had created. And then you started impinging bits of my lost reality in. I might be in the middle of a madly gay dinner party with lots of witty conversation when you suddenly switched on my real hearing and filled my poor brain with terrible noise. Or I might be writing my diary and you would give me back my sense of smell with a flash of kippers burning or something equally incongruous. Why do you do it? Is it because this mad reality will smash the fabric of my imaginary world which is the only real thing left to me? Is it designed to send me finally out of my mind? If it is I don't think you'll succeed. Not because I am defying you. Oh no. I'm much too wise now to try to defy you. If I could go out of my mind to please you, I would, and with great thankfulness. But I truly believe I can't. I truly believe now that nothing you can do to me will do the trick. If only it would. . . . If only I could find the blessed peace of everlasting gorgeous dark velvet oblivion. If only I could die again. You know how many times I have committed suicide in the last two hundred years. But I can't. I can't. I can't. I know now that I must suffer and endure . . . for ever. Ogodogodogodhavemercy-onamiserablesinner. please do. . . .

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

There can no longer be any doubt. Sadie is still a sentient entity. The electroencephalogram readings confirm beyond doubt that she is reacting with full intelligence to the sound and smell input from Spence's devices. The wave patterns show conclusively that she differentiates completely between pleasant noises and unpleasant, agreeable and noisome smells. I daren't really think too deeply about what I have done to her. What pain have I inflicted on this child since I stole her from her body eighteen months ago. Inflicted in the name of science and humanity? Of course I didn't know then that it was a sentient brain still. How could I know? Of course I couldn't.

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

Something is happening now. Dare I hope? Is it just another trick, a lifting up in order that I should crash down more deeply into despair? It probably is. I shall go on the assumption that it is, and in this way, they will not win. It is a trick. Of course it is. But, while I know it to be so, I shall enjoy the excitement of pretending that it isn't. That way I shall win. Something is happening (I'll pretend). There is a pattern to it now. There is a pattern to the sounds I hear and the smells I can smell. It's as if some mad scientist is running a test card on my reactions to things. There is a sequence to it all. What's that! A dazzling light! My sight's coming back. Not properly yet. But there was a flash. And another. Oh the pain, the pain. Never mind. One by one my senses are coming back. It isn't proper sight, but it's something. How odd! It's like looking at a radar scanner. Exactly like a radar scanner. I can recognize that. It's a cup! A cup on a radar screen.

The Diary of Dr. Dog.

My conscience will not let me sleep now. I must know. I must know what I've done to her. I think Spence is feeling it too. He's not sleeping so well, I can see. We must know. It was an intense disappointment when the limitations of the hearing device became clear. If only Sadie could have heard and recognized the human voice as she can recognize simple sounds. But she can't. It is obvious from the readings that whatever we say to her, however slowly and simply, come across as a meaningless gabble. We must wait until the Mark Two version is ready. It is clear, however, that the olfactory translator is working extremely well. To a lesser extent, so is the optic simulator. If only the Royal Radar Establishment knew the purpose for which they had designed it!

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

For the first time I am beginning to hope. In spite of all my warnings I find it difficult now to believe that it is another trick to make this hell of mine more unbearable. Something has happened to me. Something that is beyond my imagination. But I can't help beginning to think that, after all (whisper it Sadie darling) after all, I'm not dead.

But no person can live for hundreds of years, my girl. I know that. I know it's crazy. But I'm beginning to think there is a rational explanation if only I could see it. I have got a sort of hearing back—I could almost swear that some of the noises I hear are human voices distorted out of recognition. I have got a reasonable sense of smell back. And I've got this odd type of radar sight. It's all coming back, bit by bit. I can see bits of human beings come on to my screen and all sorts of things. It's a beginning, my girl. With (oh joy, oh joy) perhaps Bill at the end of it all.

Dr. Dog's diary.

We shall soon know now, of that I am sure. The hearing device, Mark Two, seems to be working adequately. So is the optic simulator. Another month and the speech channel will be programmed on to the computer. It's been a long job, but soon we shall be in communication with Sadie Smith. I must admit that my feelings are mixed. What Spence and I have done has carried the world perhaps thirty years on in the understanding and treatment of the brain. There can be no doubt that humanity owes us a great debt of gratitude. But what have I done to Sadie? What can I tell her? What will she say to me when she knows the truth? I wish it did not have to be done, but it must be done. I must know or I shall never have another night's peace in my life. If only, dear God, I had never set out on this particular trail. But I must keep it in perspective. Sadie is alive and she has full possession of her faculties. Isn't that better than being dead? Furthermore, there is no reason why I should not keep her alive indefinitely. No reason why she shouldn't be kept alive until science has caught up with her predicament. Kept alive until they know how to give her back a body. Fine words, Dog, you old bastard, but you know that you can never give her back her husband, or give her back to him. You know she can never be restored to this world in his lifetime or yours. You know perfectly well what you have done to her. Only too well. But I must know!

The mind of Sadie Thorpe.

Oh the blessed relief of knowing that I'm not dead! These words keep going round and round in my mind.

There is a lot more I want to know. A lot more they must tell me. There are a lot of unanswered questions and a lot of apparent impossibilities to explain. But the main thing is that I'm not dead and Bill's not dead and therefore everything will come out all right. I wonder why he hasn't been to see me? Perhaps I'm not considered well enough yet. But no message from him. That's odd. Oh never mind, Sadie, old thing, all these mysteries will be cleared up soon. I wonder what this doctor is like? A funny name 'Dog'. But not to worry, not to worry. I've had a bad accident and they've done a lot of things for me and soon they'll explain it all, they say, and soon I'll be in communication with them. Things are looking up. Oh God, how impatient I am to know more. . . .

Dr. Dog's diary.

Today I shall know. Today, if all goes well, Sadie Thorpe will find her voice after three years three months and fifteen days of living in the prison of her own mind. Three years of life I have given to her. Life? And what else? That I shall soon know. At least I feel lighter and cleaner from having given her the full facts. I broke it to her as gently as I could. Bit by bit. Day by day. The full story. Nobody could have tried harder to do it more tactfully. Nobody could have done it more optimistically. She knows that, one day, she will have a body again. She knows that, until then, she will be ageless and beyond harm. I have given her back hope. But what does she think? What will she say? Will she appreciate what she has helped me do for humanity? Will she understand? At least there was no very angry reaction on the electroencephalogram when I broke the final news of her plight today. That is a hopeful sign. But tomorrow I shall know. . . .

In Dr. Dog's Laboratory . . .

The cable ran from the closed and locked part of the laboratory where Sadie Thorpe lay, a grey pulsating sponge, in her blood-heat fluid nest, to the great new computer that occupied one whole wall of the outer room.

The rest of the staff had gone home. Only Dr. Theosophus Dog, thin, bald, and grey-trembling faced, and Dr.

Herbert Spence, short, chunky, and grey-trembling faced, were left.

"Well, Frank, best get it over with," said Dog. He took a desperate pinched lunge at his cigarette, and ground it out viciously on the console of the computer.

Spence nodded. Dr. Dog sat down at the console and, with shaky fingers, sought the typewriter keys which were connected to the programmed electronic brain and through that to the body less mind in the next room.

Dog's fingers stabbed down on the letters, which answered his touch with a noisy electrical reaction.

"Sadie, this is Dr. Dog," wrote the keyboard on its scroll of narrow white paper. "Can you hear me?"

There was a silence. A long, dripping, terrible silence, touched only by the asthmatic breathing of Spence and a slight insane chuckle from the electric keyboard.

Then the keyboard jumped to the touch of an invisible and non-existent finger. Jumped three times.

"Yes."

Dog's face was chalk white now as he leaned forward once more.

"What have you to say, Sadie?"

Once more the silence and the drooling escape of power from the resting keyboard. Then the letters rose and fell once more.

"God forgive you. May God forgive you." . . .

— T. F. THOMPSON

Science fiction—ourselves not least—has for some few years been saying—"Let's grow up—why the ban on sex?" We invited a veteran-editor/leading-writer to make a case for the other viewpoint:—

A COMMENT

by E. C. Tubb

When I was much younger than I am now, back in the 'good old days' which were far from that to the majority, science fiction stories had a delightful simplicity which armoured them against any objection anyone could have about their moral content. They consisted mainly of clean, straightforward action. The hero was always law-abiding, the heroine virtuous, the villain invariably bit the dust. Morality was satisfied all along the line.

There was nothing strange in this. Science fiction was a new magazine-medium without apparent limitations but with the built-in danger inherent to publication. Read widely by the young it was begging for trouble to risk offending the moral code. And there was no need to take any such risk. Science fiction could deal with all of time, of space, of the universe of worlds past and yet to come. Its keynote was action—and it didn't have to go into the bedroom to get it.

So science fiction dealt with sex in a simple and forth-right manner. It ignored it.

And, in so doing, recognized the first of its limitations. Others followed and still others will come. Mad scientists no longer threaten the world with home-brewed viruses. Rocket ships are no longer assembled in the shed at the bottom of the garden. Ham radio operators receive no alien messages in this transistorized age. Time machines are frowned on. Hidden civilizations in the Sahara or the Amazon are out of favour. Heroes no longer destroy knowledge with a pious statement. Mars is a near-airless desert, Venus a tomb, Jupiter a mess of poisonous gases. The iron hand of accepted reality has closed about the imagination and imposed a set of boundaries.

Boundaries which seem to have squeezed out the old, action-packed stories of the past.

Because of the form in which it started science fiction, as we know it, has never been noted for good writing. It has had effective writing relying heavily on the sweep of action and the presentation of novel ideas to get it by. The author pasted over the holes in the structure and the readers were willing to ignore the faults in construction, the illogic of depicted civilizations and the black and white characters. The space opera gave them what they wanted. Entertainment with a capital E.

Then, somehow, it was decided that science fiction should acquire literary pretensions.

Now it is impossible to write a story containing lots of action, fine-drawn characters, examination of basic motivations, a generous helping of philosophy together with a well-defined background and logical scientific explanation in anything like the confines of a magazine story. There simply isn't enough room. So, in order to break the encroaching boundaries, something had to be done.

It seems that what is happening is that authors are ignoring the first limitation. With a shout of pure joy they have discovered sex.

They forget that sex is not, and never will be, science fiction.

It is also, as a means of expression, extremely limited. There is only so much so many people can get up to. The combinations and permutations aren't all that many and none of them are new. Sex, as a subject, has been around for a long time now. It can hardly be classed as a science fictional subject.

And, remember, a magazine story has the overriding limitation of length.

That is why I deplore this tendency to dwell on the sexual side of things in the present mutation of science fiction. The more sex you put in a story the less action, characterisation, futuristic background, scientific content and plain, old, entertainment value you leave out. Inevitably you wind up with a sex story. Good fun, maybe, interesting, even, but a sex story isn't a science fiction story and I want to read science fiction.

It can be done, of course. Philip Jose Farmer did it with

The Lovers. Theodore Sturgeon did it with *The Wonderbirds* and again in *Green Monkey* but these stories dealt with alien sexual problems and were based on that main theme. Stories where the man and girl jump into bed and roll around for a while simply because the author needs something to fill a page aren't in the same class. Take out the theme on the above-named stories—and you haven't got a story. Take out the roll-on-the-bed stuff and you've got a pretty story. That's the difference.

I recognize the difficulty. Faced with the encroaching boundaries of scientific advancement it isn't easy to write a good science fiction story now. The temptation is to look inward instead of outward. To pry into human motivations in place of the broad sweep of space-opera action. Things are in a state of flux and, in such a state, the familiar is always the most desirable. But sex is not The Answer!

No one subject is or can be.

Science fiction is the literature of the imagination. To survive it must entertain and, if at the same time it can educate, that is a welcome bonus. There is no need to adhere to old forms of construction or old forms of storytelling. Authors must accept the challenge of the encroaching boundaries and, while respecting them, diminish their importance. A well-told tale will be that no matter what.

So I hope I never read a blurb beginning "... tears aside the hampering veils of outworn convention and blazes a new path to forbidden frontiers to delve deep into the primeval urges of . . ."

And read a story about a man and a woman on a spaceship. Or a woman and woman, or man and man, or one man and a lot of women, or one woman and a lot of men, or just a gang all mixed up together.

You name it and it's been done, in other forms and other settings, but with the same limitations. Repetition leads to boredom and science fiction should never be that.

And I don't like to think of people coming to regard my favourite form of literature as something belonging to the realm of the schoolboy snigger.

Let's not change the meaning of sf to Sexual Fabrications.

Please!

Always ready to respond to readers' demands, we asked Alistair Bevan to write a motoring fantasy to follow up his "Pace That Kills." This story isn't what we expected at all.

THE SCARLET LADY

by Alistair Bevan

I'm not essentially a violent man, but I did once commit a murder. I was never tried for it. You see I killed a car. I don't know what the legal term for that would be. Autocide perhaps. Some people claim that machines can't die. I'm not prepared to argue the point too closely. You must judge for yourself.

My victim carried a famous marque. To quote it would not be fair on her makers. They built her with care and love and skill but they built into her something that could not be set with a feeler gauge. It wasn't their fault.

My name's Bill Fredericks. I run a garage near King's Warrington. That's a quiet market town in the Midlands. I inherited the business when Pop died. I don't make a fortune but the income is comfortable. I'm still a young man. I'm married and I've got a house. I suppose all things considered I haven't done too badly. I have one brother, Jackie. He's a couple of years younger than I am. He could have come into the business when Pop died but he preferred to stay on his own. He's an accountant. The brainy one of the family. Or at least I used to think so.

I learned engineering the hard way. Pop saw to it that I did. I was apprenticed to an old boy called Charlie Elliott who runs a biggish garage a few miles off in Bracewell. I did five years with Charlie before Pop would consider letting me work for him. He reckoned father and son partnerships were no good. Perhaps if Charlie hadn't trained me our relationship would have gone sour. As it was it worked fine. It just didn't go on long enough, that was all.

I'd been running Turnpike Garage about five years when Jackie bought the car that started all the trouble. I remember the first time he drove up. It was a bright morning in early December and I was sitting in my office doing some booking. I saw the car stop on the forecourt. I knew it of course though I'd never had anything to do with it. It was a special, a one-off motor. When you're in the trade you hear about these things. I didn't pay too much attention until Jackie got out. Then I put my pen down and stared. I was still sitting like that when he breezed in. He was a grin with legs. We both spoke together. I said "Jackie, you haven't—" He said "Bill, I've—"

He stopped and laughed. He said "I've bought a car, Bill."

"So I see."

He said "Come and have a look." I followed him outside and across the apron.

My brother had always had a weakness for exotic cars. Each had turned out more expensive and unreliable than the last. This though was the biggest thing he'd ever bought. She was a saloon that had been built to a special order in nineteen-thirty-eight. Her lines were so good that at first glance her size was not apparent, but up close I saw she was huge. The cab was roomy enough but the body dwarfed it. The tail was long and low, with a boot that would have held a cabin trunk. She had a narrow, chrome-framed windscreen and she carried a spare wheel holstered in each front wing. Her bonnet curved low, ending in a squat grille that looked like a mouth with bared teeth. The illusion of a face was completed by two long air scoops in front of the scuttle. They looked like the cheekbones of a skull. Her coachwork was perfect. It was a brilliant vermillion red that shone in the sunlight. She was powerful and fast, and she also looked about the nastiest thing I'd ever seen on wheels.

I walked round her. I said "Twenty-one inch rims. That's nice. And one tyre's nearly bald."

Jackie said indignantly "She's passed her M.O.T."

I said "Twenty-one inch rims. That's nice. And one tyre's nearly bald." I opened the driving door and leaned inside to be met by a rich smell of leather. The upholstery was in as good a condition as the coachwork. I straightened

up and shoved the door. It closed with a soft whoosh, denying me even the pleasure of slamming it. I stood back and lit a cigarette. I said "Jackie, you are the world's prize idiot. How much did you give for this heap?"

He named a figure that made me feel faint. I leaned on the wing and played with one of the polished leather bonnet straps. I said "Why don't you come and see me before you do these things? If you'd only asked I could have fixed you up with a nice little motor. I had an Anglia in the other day that was going for half that price. I had a Morris Thousand the week before last that would have suited you down to the ground. Right now I could put my finger on a dozen cars that would be more reliable than this. You'll be lucky to get more than ten to the gallon with a following gale. She'd break a millionaire. Look at those tyres for a start. And the block. Everything's obsolete. Spares'll cost the earth earth even if you can still get them. And Heaven help you if anything serious goes wrong. It'd cost you about seventy quid to put a set of pistons in the brute."

I wasn't annoyed solely on his account. Whatever anyone claims, these days garages don't repair cars any more. They replace parts. Most garagemen admire old motors, they like to see them around; but they won't have them on their own forecourt for all the tea in China. You just can't spend hours fiddling around, adapting parts to fit, repairing worn-out units that should have been thrown away years ago, when everybody else is just taking parts off a shelf and smacking them in. Trends are there to be followed and in business you have to go along with them whether you approve of them or not. It's the only way to stay solvent. In this case I was in a bad position because I was morally bound to help out my own brother. I reckoned he'd chosen the fastest way to bankrupt the pair of us, and told him so. He looked so woebegone I felt really sorry for him. After all to a certain extent you have to respect a man in love, even when you know he's making a fool of himself. I agreed to go out for a run with him that evening and to have the motor in later in the week and check her over. He brightened at once. He touched the long coaming affectionately. He said "Thank's a lot, Bill. I really appreciate that. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

I said "See you tonight, Jackie. Take it steady. Remember those glass con-rods." I walked toward the garage. Half-way to the door I turned back. I said "Have you christened her yet?" Jackie always gave names to his cars. We'd had Rhoda and Florrie and even Clytemnestra. She was a vintage Austin Seven by the way. When you were talking to Jackie about his ex motors you had to remember who was who. Like reminiscing with a man who'd had too many girl friends.

He looked rapturous. He said "She hasn't got a name really. She's just the Scarlet Lady." I walked into the garage before I threw something.

That evening I told Sheila about the car. I said "Jackie's bought another one, love." She poured me a cup of tea. She said "That's nice. Did you get it for him?"

I said "No." She raised her eyebrows. "What's the matter, Bill? You look madder than you did when he had the Lagonda."

I said "I am madder than when he had the Lagonda. I've got to go over tonight and have a run in the thing. Are you coming? I think you'd better see it for yourself...."

He was working on the car when we arrived. He had her backed into the garage beside his house. She was about six feet overlong. A service lamp was clipped to the block and he was fiddling about inside the bonnet. He came over as we drew up. He was black to the elbows and he had a plug in his hand. He said "Look at this, Bill. There's a gap you could throw your hat through. And it's badly coked up. Do you think if we fined the mixture a bit——?"

I said "Stow it Jackie, I'm off duty."

He said "Oh, hello Sheila, nice to see you. But Bill, I'm sure she's too rich. Now if you checked the mixture first——"

I said "And found an odd minute to retune triple carbs——"

"The distributor wants looking at too. There's a terrific amount of play in the shaft. She's not ticking over right. I'm sure that's a lot to do with it."

I said "Jackie, it's nine o'clock and I've been talking cars all day. I'm going in to see Moira, and you can badger about there till morning."

He said "Be right with you, Bill. Must just slip these plugs back then we can go out for a run. We can go over to the Horseshoes. She's a beauty, Bill. You'll love her."

I said "Well for Pete's sake get a move on or we won't be there before chuckout time." I walked toward the house.

At the door I missed Sheila. I turned back and she was still staring at the car's awesome front. The Scarlet Lady glared back malevolently. I said "Come on love, you're as bad as he is." She turned away and gave a brisk little shudder. She said "Oof, Bill, what a horrible car. I don't like it at all."

Moira had the look of a practised motor-widow. When she saw me she laughed. We both said together "Yes, another one." She said "I suppose I ought to be getting used to it. Take your coat off, Sheila. Here, let me have it. Go on through, there's a fire in the lounge." I said "We're not supposed to get settled. We're going out." She called derisively from the hall. "When he can tear himself away. He hasn't had his dinner yet. Do you want some coffee? He'll be there all night."

For once she was wrong. Within minutes we heard the big motor start up and move out into the drive. He came in a quarter of an hour later looking almost respectable. He said "All right then, are we ready?"

The car went well. The power there was immense, and she rode like silk. I had to admit she was all motor. I guessed her top speed to be well over the ton. The tachometer chattered to itself as the big, lazy engine took us along at a shade under seventy. There was one little thing I didn't like but I chose not to mention it. Jackie drove up to the pub door, switched off and sat fondling the wheel. He said "There'll be no trouble with this one, Bill." I hoped he was right.

He rang me two mornings later. He said "It's the car, Bill. Can you come over to her?"

I smiled a saccharine smile at the wall. I said "Your head gasket has gone. She's missing and there are clouds of white smoke."

He said "Well, yes. How did you know, Bill?"

"We've got a new crystal ball." I'd heard something that first night that had sounded like a blowing gasket. I said "Where are you now?"

"At the office. I had to come in on the bus. I had to leave her!" The way he said it, it was a tragedy. I said "All right brother mine, don't panic. I fix."

He said "Is it going to be a big job, Bill? When can I have her back?"

"That depends. Normally there'd be nothing to it; just a decoke, top overhaul . . . but you haven't got an easy sort of motor. I told you that. I don't even know that I can get a gasket."

He said "You've got to get her back on the road, Bill. I need her."

I said "I'll do what I can, Jackie. I'll get her in today sometime. Ring you back." I put the phone down and swore. I'd had a busy day ahead of me. Now it was going to be busier. I drove the couple of miles to his place, had a cup of coffee with Moira then went to have a look at the car. She wouldn't start. I took the plugs out and turned her over by hand. I didn't need any proof of what was wrong but number five bore spat Bluecol so I had my proof anyway. I left the car and had the boys fetch her in the afternoon.

I was lucky with the gasket. A pal of mine who runs an auto spares place took a decoke set straight off the shelf. He must have had it in stock for twenty years. I didn't get on so well with the repair. It should have been a straightforward job but on that car nothing was easy. We found the cylinder head was warped and I had to send it out for planing. We decoked it, and fitted new valves. I left the reassembly to Don Cook, my trainee. As he was pulling the head down he broke a stud. I told him briefly what I thought about that and went onto the job with him. We had to drill out, tap the block and fit an oversize stud. That's an amusing business when you know urgent work is piling up. When it came to pulling the head down again I told Don to stand back and keep his ham fists out of the way while I did it myself. The outcome of that, of course, was that I broke another stud and we had the whole job to do again. It was a week before Jackie got the Scarlet Lady. He came round fretting and fuming every other night. My temper got thin and I told him in the end he'd get the car when I was ready and not before. He didn't say

much when he collected her, just got in and drove off. That wasn't like him. Normally he doesn't sulk.

He rang me up the next day. He was very apologetic. Could I possibly fix the top hose for him, it had split in the night.

I counted to ten. Then I said "I can, Jackie, but not before tomorrow. I just can't get out to you before then."

"Well, send one of the boys. I need that motor, Bill. I've got to have it."

"I can't send anybody before tomorrow. We've got six jobs coming in this morning. I've been putting them off all week as it is. I'm sorry, Jackie, I just can't do it."

He was silent. I got the idea he was counting as well. Then he said "Right, Bill. Sorry I was awkward. Do it when you can though; make it fast, you know how I'm fixed." The line went dead.

I put the handset down and scratched my head. I didn't 'know how he was fixed' at all. He had a perfectly good bus service that dropped him right outside his office and in any case he'd just done without a car for six months. I just didn't get the problem.

The thing stayed on my mind. After lunch I chucked some lengths of hose and some clips in the Vauxhall and drove up to his house. Moira opened the door. "Thank Heaven you've come, Bill. Can you fix it for him?"

I said "What's the matter, love? Sounds as if I'm saving his life or something."

She grinned a bit lopsidedly. She said "I don't know about his life but you'll certainly save mine. I've never known him to be like this."

I said "Like what?" Jackie was the most easy-going character. He just didn't let things throw him.

She shrugged. "I don't know. He's . . . well, he's been really odd Bill. He was bad enough all the week when he didn't have the motor, but this morning . . . oh, dear." She stopped abruptly. "Family gossip, Bill. Dirty linen. That isn't like me, is it? I think it's got me down as well. Just fix it anyway. Then we might get some peace."

I went round to the garage. He'd started work on the extension. I saw a pile of breeze blocks and some concrete posts. He was certainly going to do a job and a half on that shed. The Scarlet Lady was inside, standing in a

Technicolored puddle. I got the top hose off and fitted a new length. Just to be on the safe side I started checking the rest. An hour and a half later I was fed to the back teeth after having renewed nearly every hose on the block. I started the engine and revved to check for leaks. She seemed tight. I left a message with Moira for him to call round for some more antifreeze then went back to the garage and started trying to catch up on the day's work. I got home at half-past nine. Sheila gave me the witty treatment. "Jackie's car, I suppose?"

I looked at my grimy hands. "No, as a matter of fact it was a fancy woman. You know how it goes sometimes."

She shook her head. "I think about that motor and I wish I could believe you." She really had built up a hatred for the Scarlet Lady.

Things went along fairly quietly for a week or so. Jackie brought the motor in to have the head pulled down and I tightened the studs with a feeling in my throat as if my heart had got out of place but there were no more accidents. He was back next day and I damn near got under the desk, but he only wanted a sidelight bulb. The next morning the phone was ringing when I got to the garage. It was the police. They had a smash; could I come out to it? I hedged. I had enough to do without going out looking for work. The phone said "I think you'd better come, Bill. It's your brother."

I tried not to climb the wall. "Jackie? Is he hurt? How bad is it? What ha——?"

"He's all right, Bill. But you'd better come out. His steering went. He finished up in a field. Smashed a cow up too, just to complicate things. He's all right though. Shocked, that's all."

I found out where the place was and got the breakdown truck out. I left a note for Don and drove to the smash. I saw the Scarlet Lady half a mile before I reached her. She was well off the road, and twenty yards of hedge wasn't there to show how fast she'd gone in. There was a patrol car by her, a couple of policemen and some farming types. Jackie was sitting in the police car. His complexion would have made a good ad for the newest soap powder. I had a word with him but like they said he wasn't hurt. I got through the hedge to have a look at what had happened.

I had a shock myself. The cow went on for yards. It had been pretty thoroughly killed. Disembowelled would be the polite term. The carcass was still fixed on the dumb-irons. The Scarlet Lady grinned at me, her maw as red as her coachwork. I shook my head. I'd seen one or two pile-ups but this was something new.

I went round and tried the steering. The wheel spun freely. I opened the bonnet. The steering arm was off the bishop box. Now that can't happen because there's a castellated nut and a split pin to prevent it. Still there was the link hanging loose. I shook my head again and set about getting the car clear.

Shifting the cow wasn't the pleasantest part. In the end we hobbled its legs, hooked it onto the breakdown and winched it free. I got the Lady out at the cost of another ten feet of herbal border. The farmer was looking grim. I could just imagine the adding machine under his trilby ticking away. Jackie got continually in the way, dancing with apprehension every time a branch scraped the car. When she swallowed up onto the road he tore round to inspect the damage. I slacked off the tow, got out of the truck and went back to him. He started on me. "The wing, Bill, look at the wing. How long to repair it, I've got to have her on the road. . . . Look at it, look at the state of it!" He got down on his hands and knees, drooling over his busted coachwork.

I said "For God's sake, Jackie, we've got more trouble than a dented wing. Go and sit in the breakdown, smoke a packet of fags or something. We'll sort it all out later."

We exchanged all the particulars we could think of then I washed the car down and got her on a front-end lift. I started back to the garage. The tow was far from easy. She was a devil of a weight of course. We arrived without any more mishaps and I got Don to take Jackie over to his office, pushed the car in the corner of the workshop and started trying to catch up on my other jobs again. Halfway through the morning I remembered I'd planned to ring Charlie Elliott about a spare I needed. I went into the office, lit a cigarette and called him up. In a few moments I heard his perpetual cough on the other end of the line. He said "Hello, young Bill, wish I could say it was nice hearing from you. What are you on the scrounge for this time?"

I told him, and we arranged for him to put the unit on a bus later in the day. Then I said "Had a bit of a nasty job this morning, Charlie. Don't want too many of those."

He was quiet for a bit. Then he said "You've got the right motor for nasty jobs, Bill. She'll bring you plenty."

I said "What do you mean, Charlie?" I had a nasty feeling I already knew.

He said "The big special. The red one. BD something or other. What's she done?"

The news had certainly travelled fast. I said "Who told you, Charlie?" He laughed. "Don't know a thing. Just guessing."

"Well you're too damned accurate. I still think you've been told something. She did have a smack this morning. I've got her up here now."

"What did she do?"

I said "Went through a hedge. Killed a cow in a field."

He whistled. Then he said "Yes, she likes cows. That's a favourite one."

I thought I must have shaken a bolt. "What did you say, Charlie?"

He said "Cow-killing. I just pointed out it was a sport of hers."

I felt faint. "You mean this has happened before?"

"Oh yes," said Charlie blithely. "Twice."

I was still not sure I was hearing right. "You'd better explain this, Charlie. It's too deep for me."

He said "I serviced that car for two years after she was built. She was laid up in nineteen-forty. Didn't come on the road again till forty-seven. Pity she ever did. Do you know anything about her?"

"Barely a thing."

"She was made for an old boy who lived over at Bracewell. Old Army chap, plenty of money. Now he hit a cow in the New Forest, somewhere just topside of Ringwood. Nasty mess that was. Shook him up too. It was dark, look, and the cow was settled down in the road for warmth. You know they do that down there. Well anyway he had the car towed up and I knocked the dents out and back she went on the road. Next thing was she killed a man. Didn't know about that I suppose?"

I was getting sicker. I said "No, I didn't know. How did it happen, Charlie?"

He said "Funny affair that was look. Never sorted it out. It was over in Bampton." He hacked. "You know the hill that runs down from the Town Hall to the Church?"

"Vaguely."

He said "Well it happened on that. She was parked, look, and she ran away. Never found out how. It was a market day an' everything was pretty crowded. Well, she went down the hill veerin' and swervin' look, and this chap was at the bottom by the Church wall. She pinned him against it and that was that."

I said "But I can't see how that could happen, Charlie. Couldn't he get out of the way?"

Charlie said "I can't remember exactly. I think he tripped. Anyway she got him. You could look it up, it was all in the papers. The old boy claimed to his dying day he left the brake on and the gearstick in reverse. He couldn't have done of course. The doors were still locked when they pulled her away from the wall, and she was in neutral with the handbrake off. They threw the book at him for it. He never got over it. Been driving since cars had tillers, and never any trouble. Reckon it was the end of him. He died himself a few months afterward. Nice old chap, he was. Remember him well."

I said "What about that other cow, Charlie?"

"That wasn't very long afterward. She was sold to a lawyer. Came down from London to fetch her. Well, the day he took her back she went off the road. Tore up a hedge and there was a cow grazing close on the other side look. 'Ell of a mess again. I had to go out to it. Shook him up so bad he never drove her again. Left her with me to sell. She went down to the west country after that. I lost track of her but I reckon there was some trouble down there. She changed hands half a dozen times then she came back here. Old Doctor Simms bought her. Now when the war broke out he laid her up——"

I said "Charlie, how did she come to be off the road that last time? When she killed the cow?"

He said "Mysteries all the way round with the car, Bill. The steering arm was off the box. Never worked out how it happened."

I felt it was time I sat down. I said "She killed a cow this morning, Charlie. Disembowelled it. The steering arm is off the box."

There was silence for a long time. Then he said "Who owns her?"

"My brother."

He said "Oh Gawd. Look, Bill, make him get rid of her. There's something far wrong. I've bin in the trade all my life and I haven't come across another like her. You get unlucky motors, I know that; some are just bad 'uns, nobody can say why. But that one . . . well, it's evil, Bill, and I mean that. Ditch it before anything else happens. You tell him from me."

I tried to get Jackie to part with the Scarlet Lady, but he wouldn't listen to reason. She had to go back on the road, the faster the better. I sent her up the hill to the place that does my bodywork and the dents were transferred to Jackie's bank balance. A week later he rang me up and I got pains in the chest again.

But the Scarlet Lady hadn't killed. She'd merely dropped a cylinder liner into her sump. . . .

* * *

I spread the pieces along the bench. I said "Here's your liner, or what's left of it. Number three four and five big ends. You can take it from me the crankshaft's beaten up. As far as I can see it only adds up one way. Scrap her, Jack. Write her off. You've spent too much as it is."

He looked at me as if I'd hit him. "Write her off? You don't know what you're saying. You must be mad, Bill. I can't do a thing like that."

I said "But it'll cost you fifty quid at least to sort this lot out. Could be a Hell of a sight more. See reason, Jackie, the motor just isn't worth it. And take my word if you grind that crankshaft you're going to have trouble and trouble and trouble. You get through the skin, you get into soft metal——"

He said "All right, Bill, so you're against her. You always were. So forget it. If you won't do it I'll find someone who will. There are other garages." He turned on his heel and walked off.

I caught him at the door and grabbed his arm. "Come on, Jackie, we're big boys now."

He knocked me off. He had a queer look in his eyes. He said "Don't push me, Bill ; I might push back."

I stood there feeling lost. We'd always got on pretty well. I couldn't remember there ever being a row like this. I said "For Heaven's sake, Jackie, let's go in the office and have a talk. We can sort this thing out."

He agreed to that, surprisingly. We went in and I shut the door. I hooked the chair out with my foot and sat down on the bench. I said "There's some cigarettes there. Have one and chuck one to me. Then calm down and tell me what's eating you. This just isn't like you, Jackie. You know that."

He said "Thanks." He fumbled to open the packet, lit up and passed it to me. He blew a cloud of smoke and sat quiet for a minute. Then he said "Sorry about that, Bill. Don't know what came over me. I'm jumpy these days. Must have been overdoing things."

I said "You've got something on your mind about that blasted car, and it's rapidly turning into an obsession. Watch it, Jackie ; that's the way these things grow." For a moment I saw that funny light in his eyes again. I said "No use fooling, brother, I've known you too long."

He laughed at that. He said "All right Bill, I'll be straight with you. You're right in a way. It's queer. In a way I suppose I'd be glad to see the back of her but it's just that . . . well, I've got this drive to keep her running. When she's off the road, even temporarily, it's a real pain to me. I can't explain it but that's how it is. As for scrapping her, well, it's unthinkable. I don't think I could do it. She'd . . . well, I don't know. I couldn't do that."

I said "I'm beginning to wonder who owns who. You haven't bought a car, you've taken a bloody mistress."

He jumped as if I'd stuck a needle in him. Then he shook his head. "I'd hardly put it as strong as that Bill. But I don't want to scrap her. Not at this stage. I've got too much money tied up in her. She's carrying a lot of rubber. If I pack in now, I lose what I've already spent. Better to increase the investment and get another couple of years use from her. I wouldn't get a penny for her as she is."

That's the old argument of the car-lover of course. It doesn't really hold water. I still had the idea he was hedging but there wasn't much I could do. I shrugged. "Well,

if that's the way you want it Jackie, I shall have to straighten her out for you. I can't let you go anywhere else ; they'd either refuse to touch the car or take it in, do a bitch job and charge you the earth to make sure you didn't go back. Either way I should have to do it eventually. Leave it with me. But just one thing. Don't pester me for it under two weeks at the earliest. Preferably three. I lost a customer the other day through that bloody thing. I can't afford to turn trade away while I'm tinkering with that monster, Jackie ; you must see that. I'm not in business for kicks."

He agreed and we left it at that. I hadn't given him the full story of course. I could only charge him cost, and while we were on the job we were losing profit on everything else. Still that was the sort of situation it was. Jackie kept himself happy building the garage that would house the Scarlet Lady when I'd finished with her.

Things were quiet for a while but my brother's obsession built up steadily. I began to see a pattern in the wilderness. The car had to be complete in every detail down to the last warning light on the dash, the last stud in the carpet. For instance, the day after Jackie got the car back he had a puncture. He brought the wheel in and I naturally expected him to leave it and pick it up later. After all, he had a second spare. He wouldn't hear of it ; the job had to be done on the spot. He made such a noise I went and repaired the wheel for the sake of peace. A week later a semaphore arm packed up. I didn't argue that time, just got a replacement unit and put it straight in. There was another shindy when he came to have the head pulled down again. Young Tim did or said something that upset him and he called the lad every name he could think of. I never did find out what started the row.

To make things worse, the Scarlet Lady didn't stop killing. It was all small game ; three or four cats, then the neighbours' dog. The dog just bolted under the wheels. No reason for it. Then of all things Jackie killed a fox, got home with the remains jammed in the stoneguard. I saw Moira in town and she told me about that. She was beginning to look as strained as Jackie. She said "I'm just wondering how long it's going to be before . . . well, before it's a person. . . . Honestly Bill, every day's alike. I keep

thinking 'What's he going to hit? What's going to run underneath today?' Do cars get bloodlusts, Bill? I'm beginning to wonder. . . ."

I said "Moira, for Heaven's sake. The motor has some bad luck, I admit that, but it's just one of those things. Let's keep a sense of proportion."

She shook her head violently. "It isn't a sense of proportion that's wanted, Bill. And there's no luck involved. The car has to have regular doses of blood, that's all. It's like a vampire."

"Moira. . . ."

She said "Listen to me. And I used to be so level-headed, you know that Bill. But I'm afraid of that car, I'm afraid of what it might do. I go to the gate at night when he drives up. Just to find out what's happened. I remember the fox. . . . He said 'No trouble today, love'. Just like that. And there was this thing, and the tail hanging, as if the car was eating it. . . . I couldn't say anything, only point. He said he hadn't felt it . . . you couldn't hit a thing as hard as that and not feel it, could you Bill?"

I frowned. "I don't know. You can never tell. Queer things happen."

She said "I don't like seeing things all mangled up. I'm not squeamish but I keep thinking next time it might be a person. . . . The dog, Bill, the Greenaways' dog. It wasn't killed straight away, you know. It lay there in the road, trying to bite its back. . . . I see the car in the mornings sometimes, before he gets it out of the garage. Just sitting there, glaring. I've tried to be logical and all that but it isn't any good, Bill. I'm scared of that motor, I always was. And a sense of proportion isn't going to help. Bill. . . ."

"What?"

"Has it ever killed anyone?"

That took me aback. I didn't say anything coherent for a minute and she nodded briskly, as if I'd just confirmed something she'd known all along. "Thanks, Bill. I thought so. Now at least I know what to expect."

I said "Moira, there's no reason to——"

She cut me off. "Well, I mustn't keep you, I suppose you're busy. Goodbye Bill, see you sometime." She weaved away down the street and left me staring.

Despite Moira's fears the Scarlet Lady got through the

winter without any major tragedies. I saw her a couple of times in King's Warrington, parked at the kerb or pushing her long skull face round a corner. She always managed to give me a shock. Maybe it was association but I was beginning to hate the great rod myself. I got behind her on the road once but she walked away from the Velox and I wasn't standing still. Jackie was driving her like a bat out of Hell. It was obvious there was going to be trouble sooner or later.

She killed in the spring.

It wasn't my brother's fault. He'd taken Moira out for a drive round Bracewell. She used to go with him for the sake of peace, though I knew she hated every minute of it. They were on their way back, cruising at sixty on a straight bit of road, when a lad came out of a gateway on a push-bike. Jackie did everything possible, the skidmarks proved that. He virtually missed the boy; they reckoned a wing mirror touched the bike, that was all. Jackie spun off and went through a hedge on the opposite side of the road. The boy was thrown in the ditch. Normally he'd have got away with concussion or a broken arm or something like that, but this was the Scarlet Lady's handiwork. He was thrown off head first just where a culvert emptied into the ditch. There was new concrete, and the shattering had left sharp edges. . . .

I went out to fetch the car. I had to go to the inquest. When I saw Moira there I thought she'd aged twenty years in as many days. She trembled, she was crying and she was that pale she looked transparent. Jackie had brought her down in the car but she wouldn't go back in it. I took her home in the Vauxhall. I didn't have much to say to my brother. I was hoping he'd trade the motor in now, if only because his wife was headed for a nervous breakdown. He did no such thing of course.

I didn't hear anything of either Jackie or Moira for some weeks. We'd been in the habit of going over to their place pretty frequently but he didn't phone and I wasn't going to take the first step. The inquest had strained the old family relations more than a little, and basically I hate trouble: I'd caught the look he'd given me when Moira had asked me to take her home, and believe me it hadn't been nice. I figured he'd be in touch when he cooled down. I suppose it was

weak of me but I was busy anyway. I had my hands full at the garage. There was so much work I was thinking about taking on another mechanic.

Sheila asked me once or twice what was happening about the car but I put her off or made negative noises. I'd been in enough scenes already over the damned thing. I always did have two left feet when it came to handling people. I think I'm better with motors; well, normal ones at least. Not . . . whatever the Scarlet Lady was. She was not normal . . . demon or spirit, I don't know. I'm just giving the facts here.

Moira telephoned my house one evening in early June. I'd got in late from work and I was just sitting down to tea when the phone went. I started to swear and Sheila shushed me. "I'll see to it, you have your meal." She went into the hall and I heard her speaking. She was back in a moment, frowning. "Sorry love, it's Moira. She wants you, wouldn't say why . . . Bill, are things all right over there? She sounded queer."

I got up with my mouth full. "Mmm . . . don't know. Should be all right. Come 'n' listen." She followed me out and I picked up the handset. "Hello, Moira, Bill here. Something wrong?"

She said "Bill, are you alone?" She sounded short of breath, as if she was panting or crying. I beckoned Sheila and she came and put her ear close to the phone. I said "Course I'm alone, what's the matter?"

She said "I've only got a minute. I wouldn't want anybody else to hear. . . ."

"Moira, what is it? Is it Jackie?"

She was crying openly now. "Bill, you've got to help. I can't stand it any more. I wanted to ring you but he wouldn't let—oh God. . . ."

"Moira?"

Gulp. She said "It's all right, I thought that was him. I thought he'd followed me."

I said "Followed you? What the Hell——"

She said "I'm in a phone box. He thinks I've come out for cigarettes. I don't know how to tell . . . I'm frightened of him now. It's the car, Bill. He hasn't spoken to me for days. He spends all his time out there with it, I don't think he even knows I'm here. Except when I try to ring. . . ."

Sheila looked at me wide-eyed. I felt her hand tighten on my arm. The phone said scratchily "I shouldn't have called but I had to talk to someone. Go and see him at the office Bill. I think he's . . . oh God, isn't this terrible . . . there's something wrong about the car. He talks to it. He stays out there for hours, cleaning it and polishing . . . he keeps muttering all the time. I don't know what he's saying but I know he's talking to it."

I said "Moira, you're not making sense. . . . I'd better come over."

"Oh God no . . . promise you won't. Bill. He'd know it was me. . . ."

Either Moira was screwy or it was my brother. Either way it wasn't nice. But something had to be done. I tried to calm her. "Look, he was always fond of the motor. You know he was. He goes potty about his cars. He used to before you knew him, years back."

Her voice altered. "Yes, all right Bill. Just forget I called will you? It was a mistake. Try and forget about it. . . ."

Sheila started shaking her head violently. I said "Moira, I'll go see him at the office. I'll make a point of it. tomorrow. He might need a break or something. . . ."

Whatever it was that was wrong, it had scared the pride out of her. She started to snuffle again. "Would you Bill, I wish you would . . . please be careful, don't say I rang you. I don't know what he'd do. . . ."

I said firmly "It'll be all right love. Thanks for calling. I'll have a chat with him. I can cope."

She said "Please be careful . . . do you know he sleep-walks?"

"What?"

She said "Night after night. He gets up, puts his things on, goes downstairs . . . I know he isn't awake. If you saw his face . . . he isn't awake when he does it."

This was worse than I'd thought. "Where the Hell does he go?"

She laughed. It wasn't a nice sound. "Can't you guess? To the garage, to that . . . thing. He just stands there, stands for an hour or more with his . . . hand on the wing. I watch him, I know. . . ."

"Have you been down to him? I don't know much about this sort of thing . . . you could get him back, you're sup-

posed to be able to lead a sleepwalker back . . . do you go down?"

She said "What, touch him? When he's touching the car?"

Sheila put a hand to her throat.

I said "Look, Moira, I think I'd better come round straight away."

"No, for God's sake. . . ." She panicked suddenly. "I've got to go, he'll know I've telephoned. . . . I'll be all right, goodbye. . . ." The phone clicked and went dead. It left us just staring at each other.

I rang Doc Evans after surgery hours. He'd known us both since we were kids but it still wasn't an easy call to make. I just told him what Moira had said, underlining it with what I knew myself. He hummed and hawed. He said he was sure it was nothing serious, just nerves or over-work or something like that. He reckoned a few days rest would work wonders. He asked me to get Jackie to call in for a check-up. I thanked him and told him I'd do what I could.

I couldn't settle that night. When we turned in I couldn't sleep. About two in the morning I gave up trying. I got up and started to dress.

Sheila spoke from the darkness. "Bill, what's the matter?"

"Nothing love. You get some rest."

"Where are you going?"

I said "I'm taking a run over to Jackie's place. Just to make sure everything's all right."

She snapped the light on and sat up looking startled. "Is that wise?"

"It'll be all right. I won't knock 'em up or anything. I just want to see this thing myself. If there's something phoney going on I want to know."

"Bill, be careful."

"Don't worry. You go to sleep. I shan't be long."

There was a good moon. I sidled the Vauxhall out of the drive and away. The night was so bright I didn't need headlights. About a quarter of a mile from Jackie's house I stopped the engine. There was a slight gradient and I coasted the rest of the way. I felt spooky; the hedge shadows were ink-black and everything was very quiet.

No noise except the tyres whispering on the road. I slowed down outside the house and let the car roll till I could see his drive through a gap in the hedge.

I had a shock. I was already being watched. The car was nosed out of the garage, for all the world as if she was taking the air. The moonlight robbed her of colour, made the skull effect stronger than ever. The windshield glared darkly. Nothing was moving anywhere.

I settled down to wait. Somewhere an owl was hunting and I saw a bat cross the moon. I wanted a smoke but I daren't risk the flare of the match. I got comfortable in the seat. If necessary I was going to watch all night.

I suppose half an hour went by, maybe more. I dozed off. When I woke the moon was lower. I sat up with a jump wondering where the Hell I was. I looked across at the house. Nothing had changed.

Or had it? I stared at the car, trying to decide whether or not it was nearer to me. After a time I was sure of it. Now it was ten feet or more clear of the garage. The moon was touching the saloon roof; before, it had been in shadow.

My back crept. I don't know why, but the altered position of the motor upset me. Why should a parked car move on a moonlit night? Who would move it? I leaned back then sat upright again sharply. I'd seen something in the shadows by the house, I was sure of it. I strained my eyes but there was nothing there now. I nearly got out of the Vauxhall and went across, but it wasn't worth the risk. I didn't want Jackie to catch me prowling about there, it would give the whole game away. I stayed where I was watching, with the car watching back. I saw nothing else, and when the first birds started to chirp I gave up. If there had been a floorshow I'd missed it. I let the brake off, glided a couple of hundred yards from the house then started on the clutch and circled back home.

I went to see Jackie as promised. I was shocked by the change in him. I reckon he'd lost the best part of a stone in weight, his cheeks were hollowed and he didn't have a spark of colour. I came straight to the point. I told him he looked lousy, why didn't he go for a checkup?

That did it. He raved, he swore; told me to mind my own business, get out and run my affairs and let him run

his. Then he turned really mean. Asked me if 'that bitch of a wife of his' had been getting round me. That needled me. We had some more crosstalk and it ended with Jackie using a word that between brothers is just plain thoughtless. After I'd picked him up he just sat and rubbed his jaw. He said "Why d'you do that, Bill? Why d'you do that?"

I had to sit down myself. I just don't lose my temper and slug people. Least of all my brother. I sketched in what he'd said and he looked dazed. "I couldn't have talked to you like that, Bill, it just isn't possible." He looked like a man who'd just been told he'd kicked a pet dog to bits.

I didn't ask him to go and see Doc Evans, I told him that was where he was headed. He didn't argue. He went the same evening.

I don't know what the doc said to him or what he prescribed but it certainly worked. Or seemed to at the time.

A short while later Jackie rang me and asked if I'd like to take Sheila round for a couple of hours that evening. He said he was nearly back to normal and that he was taking a rest for a week or so. His nerves had been on edge, he'd hardly known what he was doing.

He looked a lot fitter, and Moira was back on form too. Jackie apologized for the worry he'd given us all. We brushed it off. It was a case of least said, soonest mended. He hadn't parted with the car but I reckoned we could get him round to that later. No point in rushing things.

Life went smoothly for a time. Even the Scarlet Lady behaved herself. Oh, she broke a spring in a pothole and I had to get a smith to make up a new one because there were no spares to be had, but after what had been happening I classed that as a minor repair. We were still on the best of terms when September came round and Jackie raised the question of holidays.

For some years we'd been in the habit of going off together, the four of us in one car with a trailer for tents and luggage. Usually we toured the west country. We used to have a lot of fun. Jackie wanted to do the same thing again and I'd got no objections. We had the maps out when I said something about having to fit in a service on the Vauxhall. There was some clutch-slip there and she was due for a grease-up. Jackie sat up sharply. Why was I bother-

ing with the Velox when we were going in the Scarlet Lady?

There was the sort of silence that can best be described as maternal. Jackie looked round our faces anxiously. "What's the matter? There's nothing wrong with the car. That's all over, isn't it?"

He'd got us of course. Nobody wanted to argue with him for fear of starting him ticking again. We had to give in. He was playing it clever.

When we got home Sheila had the look on her face that you'd expect to see if you told someone they'd got a month to live. Sort of stricken: I couldn't think of anything to say; we both knew we were caught. I brooded over the thing for a bit. A few days later I rang Charlie Elliott. I hadn't seen him for over six months; I said it was high time I had a beer with him. We arranged to meet the same evening in the White Swan at Bampton.

I took Sheila over. Charlie was in the saloon bar when we arrived. It's a nice, atmospheric sort of pub, an old low place with heavy beams and white walls golden-glazed with nicotine. Charlie made a fuss of Sheila and she purred a bit; she always had liked him. He's a funny old boy; he's one of those people who never look completely at home in anything except a boiler suit. He has big nobby hands, a wild thatch of grey hair that never will lay flat; but he has a sort of way with him. It makes you wonder why he never got married.

He set up the first round and we started yarning. Charlie breathes motors, lives for them; he's a real old-time mechanic. I always enjoy talking to him. Maybe it's because he puts me in mind of Dad. It wasn't long before the discussion got round to the Scarlet Lady. Charlie shook his head and ruffled his hair up even worse. Sheila stroked the ash from her cigarette, frowning. "Charlie, what's wrong with that car? There's something, I know there is. Something horrible about it."

Charlie said "It's mixed up with probabilities, look. It can all be explained. It's like people getting sweaty hands. They have accidents."

"Er . . . sorry, Charlie, what did you say?"

I said "Don't worry Sheila, he's always like this. He gets to the point eventually."

Charlie glared at me. "I knew a chap that had sweaty hands. Carpenter. Had to give it up." He groped in his pocket and found a coin. He laid it on the table. He said "I've just tossed this penny and it's come down heads. What were the odds on that?"

I said "Fifty-fifty." It seemed reasonable.

Charlie nodded. "Now I say I've tossed it ninety-nine times, look. And it's been heads every time. And I toss it again. What are the odds on tails?"

Sheila and I both started to say "A hundred to one." Then we stopped and looked at each other. Charlie smiled angelically. "Fifty-fifty, my children. Can't be any other. There are still two sides."

I said "Any moment now we're going to hear about monkeys chained to grand pianos."

Charlie looked disturbed. "Has it run over a monkey?"

"There aren't any available. Otherwise it would have."

Sheila said "What you're both getting at is that the whole thing's a matter of luck."

Charlie said "Probabilities. People don't understand 'em. Like the penny coming down heads. People think if it happens a hundred times straight off there's something queer about it. It's improbable but there's nothing in the book to say it can't happen. In a way it's an expression of normality. Like winning the pools."

I said "So a car that runs over everybody and everything, busts itself up three or four times a year and drives my brother half round the bend, that's normal."

Charlie shook his head. "No, just the opposite. It's a dangerous thing. Haunted or possessed or something."

"But you just said——"

He said "Don't forget people get sweaty hands."

"Oh yes, sweaty hands. Of course."

Charlie said "One in every ten thousand dogs is going to get run over every day. And one in every hundred thousand people. So you go out and plough something up. The next day you do it again. The odds haven't altered."

"But Charlie, that's ten thousand to one against. The penny was only fifty-fifty."

Charlie said patiently "I'm not trying to prove it's necessary to have smashes. Only that it isn't supernatural. Now I know a chap who was a carpenter. One day his saw

skidded, look, went through his hand. He was off work for weeks. He got a thing about it happening again. He got nervous. The first day he was back on the job he took the top of a finger off."

Sheila shuddered. "Is there any point in that, Charlie, or is it just a horrible bedtime story?" She looked with distaste at her Bloody Mary.

I said "It's all right love, he means the car can't get accident prone but the driver can. And then the odds come down."

Charlie looked pleased. "You'll make an engineer yet, young Bill. Have another beer."

I said "No, it's my round." I went to order. When I got back Sheila said "It's all very well philosophising Charlie, but we've got to go on holiday in the thing."

Charlie acted startled. "Why didn't you say. . . . Let's think a minute now." He put his head in his hands then looked up and grinned. "Right, I've got it. Time for the irrational. Very comforting. What's the basis of your fear of the motor?"

Sheila said "I don't know. I think because it kills things. It seems to want to kill things."

Charlie said "Which implies sentience. Do you think it's sentient, Bill?"

I said "Hell, Charlie, it's just a heap of iron. You know it can't be sentient."

He shook his head. "But see the way it glares, Bill. Got a face, look. Nasty thing, that car is. You know it thinks as well as I do."

I said "All right, so it thinks. It's a . . . devil with wheels. Does that suit you?"

He said "Pretty good for a learner, Bill. That'll do. Yes, I like that. Devil with wheels. Very theatrical. Just what we needed. . . . Well, assuming that it's sentient, where's the safest place to be if it isn't inside it? It won't let itself get destroyed, will it?" He saw the look on my face and drank his pint at one go. He always was an exhibitionist. He said "Drop of good beer tonight. Tip up, young Bill, you're getting behind."

I spent a week wondering whether he'd helped us or not. I've never made up my mind whether Charlie should have

been a head shrinker or a crossword puzzle inventor. Some-how he seemed wasted as a mechanic.

We went away in the car. She ran like a dream. I think she was just showing us what she could do. There was something about that motor all right. She was a car that wanted to get up and run, jump a few folds of downland before breakfast. We never had her flat out, but her top speed was well over the ton and she'd cruise at ninety as sweet as at forty-five. On the sort of road she was built for there was nothing to touch her. I got a double kick out of her because it was my engine that was ramming us about and I knew I'd done a good job. I remember thinking how lucky it was Jackie hadn't let me scrap her back in the winter. I was almost beginning to see his point of view. I suppose we were all hoping she'd come through her run of bad luck at last though nobody mentioned it. We were wrong of course. She was just playing with us.

We clipped down through Hampshire, turned west to Poole and worked our way through Wareham to the Dorset coast. That area always gets me; the slashes and bites in the land where the sea's been mumbling for centuries, the ragged, mournful hills, the bleak indifference of the whole lee shore. We went down as far as Weymouth then cut back north-east again to the valley of the Cerne. There's a God up there and he's always at home. You can see his outline cut in the chalk like an X-ray picture hundreds of yards long. From Cerne Abbas to Sherborne, dreaming on its hill, and from there west again through the Blackmoor Vale, through Somerset and Devon into Cornwall. There the land is different again, even the names change. Tintagel, Restormel; they sound like old armour ringing. At the end of the second week we were right down in the toe of England and we'd run out of time. We turned the car for home.

I still hate the memory of that damned motor. I've tried to rationalize it away but it isn't any good. I must just tell this the way it occurred to me. She was the Enemy all right. I don't know how or why but she was the Enemy. . . .

The holiday was ten minutes from finished. We were about three miles from Jackie's place, on a long straight with a down gradient. Jackie was driving, taking things steady. It was dusk and I think the girls were asleep in the

back. I saw something on the road ahead of us. A cyclist, freewheeling down the slope at a good pace. As we got closer I saw he was carrying a kiddie on his handlebars. I don't like to see people do that, it isn't safe. . . .

Jackie slowed as we came up behind and the rider spared one hand from steering and waved us through. Jackie pulled out wide and moved alongside. But he didn't pass. We stayed abreast of the cyclist, pacing him. I said "Go on, Jackie, it's clear."

He didn't answer and I looked across at him. His face was drawn. The old strained expression. I said sharply "What's the matter?"

I heard Sheila come alive with a bump. She grabbed my shoulder. I had the same presentiment in the same moment but there was nothing I could do.

We were held there, in the ringside seats. We couldn't miss the details. The kid looked across at us. She was pretty. She smiled slowly, as if we were old friends she hadn't seen for years.

And pushed her legs down into the spokes of the wheel. . . .

* * *

It was all ruined of course. The good the holiday had done us was just washed out. All we could think about was the smash. What had happened to the kid and her father. Sheila lay awake most of the night sweating and swearing. No accident is pleasant but there had been an extra quality about this one, a sort of slow-motion underwater sensation like you get in a nightmare. It was the way we'd been held there close up, so we could see it and hear it. . . . Sheila said there was a thick chunk-chunk when the spokes bit in. I don't know. I can't remember. I kept seeing the victims cartwheeling, the pair of them going over and over for yards and yards and yards, splashing the car with blood. I don't think I'll ever get it right out of my mind.

Jackie was round to see me two days later. All the nervousness was back. He hopped across the forecourt like a sparrow. Even while he was talking to me he couldn't keep still. I had to help him out again. Moira wouldn't ride in the car any more, not ever. So he wanted the rod resprayed to look different. That would put everything right. He'd got it all worked out for me, would I get it done?

So the luck was in the paint. Very logical. I rubbed my face and sat for a minute. Then I said "All right, Jackie, let's have a look at what you want."

He'd even done a drawing, in colour. He'd never showed any leanings in that direction before but the sketch was pretty good. I stared at it. He didn't want a dual tone, he wanted a triple. Dark grey wings, medium grey on the sides, white for the roof and bonnet top. I couldn't see the job being done for less than fifty or sixty quid. And he'd told me in Cornwall they were thinking about starting a family. So it was a good time to start throwing money round giving his mechanical mistress a facial. I said "Jackie, is it really worth it?"

He was all set to jump down my throat. "If you won't do it—"

I said "Yes, I know, someone else will." I could just imagine what Moira would think. I could still remember her face after the crash. I said "All right, Jackie, bring it in. Give me a fortnight, they're pretty busy up the road. And don't tell Moira I talked you into it. Just say I think you need a jacket with extra-long sleeves."

He didn't answer that, just went across to the car and started up. A few moments later the Scarlet Lady came leering into my workshop again.

I took her up the hill to the coachbuilders and briefed the foreman on what wanted doing. He just nodded, raised his eyebrows and wrote the numbers down off the paint card. I said "Don't ask me to explain it, Frank, I'm just the middleman." I walked out feeling mad that there was nothing to get mad at.

The crazy triple scheme worked. I had to admit it. They brought the motor round ten days later. They'd done up the wheels and accessories as well and she looked a dream. You could see people turning their heads to stare at her as she sat on the forecourt. I put off delivering her for a couple of hours but I badly wanted her out of the way. In the end I called Don and told him to chase me in the Velox. I drove the car into Jackie's garage and went to the house with the keys. Moira opened the door before I reached it. She didn't speak. Her expression was enough. I said "Look, Moira, I couldn't help doing the job. If I'd

have refused he'd just have gone to someone else. As it is he's getting it at cost. I couldn't do any more. . . ."

She snapped her fingers for the keys. "All right Bill, forget it. Just gimme-gimme. I've got to call him as soon as the car gets back." She smiled brightly. "Standing orders. Most important."

I opened my mouth then shut it again. The Vauxhall drew up in the road and tooted. She said "There's your boy, Bill. Off you go. Thanks for bringing the car."

I walked away. Halfway to the gate she called me. I turned back. She said "By the way, just for the record; the car isn't the Scarlet Lady any more. She's Nadia. It suits the colour scheme, you see. A cool name, like rocks and snow." She closed the door.

"Nadia" repaid Jackie the very next morning.

No-one ever worked out why it happened. He was in the habit of giving the engine half a dozen turns with the handle in the mornings. Now normally he backed the car into the garage, but I'd put her in nose first. I'd also left her in gear. Some people don't approve of that but it just happens to be a habit of mine. I slack the handbrake to stop the cables from stretching. In any case the point is academic; Jackie, being a good driver, always checked a motor for neutral anyhow. This morning he didn't. That was the first mystery. He switched on, opened the choke, wound up the dash accelerator and walked round to the front. He put the handle in the guides and gave it a pull-up. The second mystery was how the engine could fire, start in gear and keep on firing. She came forward so fast he didn't have a chance. The handle, with the vibrating dog behind it and all the weight of the motor, broke one of the concrete uprights clean off about eighteen inches from the ground. On the way, it passed through his leg.

I got down there as soon as I heard of course. They'd taken him off in a pretty bad way. I took the car back with me. In the evening they let Moira see him. I went over to the hospital with her. Jackie was in a private room. He lay there quietly, his face about the colour of the bed linen. He ignored his wife completely. Some fool of a doctor had cut the handle up getting it out of his leg. Could I get him another starting handle as quickly as I could?

Moira began to cry. She didn't make any noise. The tears

just tracked down her face to her chin. I took her out, sat her in the Vauxhall, went round and got in the driving seat. I gave her a cigarette and lit it for her. She lay back, eyes closed. She said "You're going to hate me for this Bill. I hate myself."

I knew what was coming. I wished I didn't. "What do you mean?"

She said flatly. "I'm leaving him. I can't take any more. Will you drive me back so I can get my things?"

I sat and gripped the wheel and wished myself anywhere else but in that car. "It's not the sort of thing a man likes to do for his brother."

She reached for the door handle. "All right. If you won't I'll find someone else."

I switched on and rammed the starter. "I get tired of people hanging things over me. Bloody tired. Let's get it done with."

I took her to the house and waited while she packed. She didn't take long. Then I drove her the ten miles or so to her parents' home. I left her there and went back to Sheila. The way I was feeling only she could help me.

Jackie was in hospital for weeks. There was a time when they thought he'd have to lose the leg. The damage healed eventually. It left him with a limp he'll always have. He came round to the garage as soon as they let him out. He wanted his car.

I stood and looked him up and down. "You can have it with pleasure, boy. Don't bring it back. How's Moira?"

"I . . . don't know. I haven't seen her."

I said "As a matter of fact I think you'd better make yourself scarce as well. I can't cope with you any more. You've gone past me."

He grinned lopsidedly. "Fair enough Bill. But get me the car. She's all I've got now."

I tried to start the rod but she wouldn't have any. The battery had lost its charge and I didn't have a service spare. I chucked Jackie out and told him I'd deliver her. Maybe that evening, maybe the next. He limped off without a word.

I put the battery on charge and left it overnight. Next day was hectic. I had to ask Don to stay on after six to help me with the delivering. By the time we'd cleared the

shop it was almost eight. There was only the Scarlet Lady left. I fetched the battery and hooked it onto her. She wouldn't even cough.

I checked round her. The spark was good and she was getting fuel. I tried the starter again but it was no good. The battery began to flatten once more. I found an old lorry handle that fitted her and gave it to Don. I said "Turn her a bit, will you? For God's sake though, don't push her over the top."

He tried for ten minutes, engaging the handle and jerking it upwards. She was dead. He frowned, spat on his hands, took a fresh grip and spun the handle right round.

She backfired with a crash like a howitzer. Don was lifted straight off his feet. The handle racketed back round in the guides and he rolled across the floor to the wall. He got up clutching his arm.

He was a good boy. I put a jacket round his shoulders and ran to get the Vauxhall out onto the apron. On the way to hospital he just sat and watched his wrist swell. They X-rayed and put on the first half of the plaster. Then I took him home.

It was late when I got back to the garage. The lights were still burning as I'd left them. The car grinned at me from across the workshop. I walked up and stood looking at her for a few minutes. Then I opened the bonnet and reset the distributor, retarding the spark. I switched on and tried to swing her. It was hopeless. Like juggling with sacks of coal. I put the spark back the way it was and stepped up to the handle feeling I was entering an arena. I gripped it and pulled up sharply.

She started like a lamb.

I drove her to Jackie's place. There was no lights on when I got there. I left the car outside the garage, put the keys through his letterbox and walked away, I didn't want to see him. I started hitch-hiking. I was lucky. I got a lift within a mile. I was home just before twelve.

I saw nothing of my brother for nearly a fortnight. Sheila asked me about him a couple of times and I just shrugged. I'd had enough. She started to use the silent-reproach technique. I knew she was right of course, I couldn't just let things go on like that. One morning I rang his office from

the garage. They said he hadn't showed up yet. I tried his home number and there was no answer there either.

I sat and drummed my fingers for a few minutes. I had a queer feeling something was wrong. I went and found Tim and told him to hold the fort for an hour. I got the Vauxhall out and drove over to my brother's house. I parked outside and got out. Everything was very quiet. Nobody about. Somewhere an engine was running raggedly but that was the only sound. I started to walk toward the front door.

I swore at myself for a fool and ran back to the garage. The port was shut. The engine beat was coming from inside.

I stormed through the house scattering mats. No sign of Jackie. I went through the kitchen and opened the side door of the garage. White fumes met me, billowing out. I could just see the bonnet of the car inside.

I went in and groped at the driving door. He was in there and he was limp. I reached across him and stopped the engine. Then I tried to pull him clear. He was heavy and there was no room to move. I took a deep breath and heaved. The garage turned upside down and shook itself and I landed on the floor.

I got outside, soaked a handkerchief under the kitchen tap and tied it round my face. I felt my way back past the car to the port. I found the catch and released it. The door swung up letting in a burst of sunlight. Thick smoke rolled across the drive. I got hold of the car's fender and pulled praying she wouldn't be in gear. She rolled forward stiffly. I dragged him out. I couldn't tell whether or not he was breathing. I laid him down and tried to remember what I'd been taught about artificial respiration.

I was still pumping away when somebody ran up behind me. I looked round. A woman, hand to her throat. She said "I saw you pull him out. What happened?"

"Would you get an ambulance please?"

"Is he dead?"

I said "For Christ's sake get a bloody ambulance." She looked startled and scurried away.

A few minutes later Jackie coughed and tried to sit up. I got him on his feet and he hung on the fence retching. I half carried him into the house, laid him down on the sofa

in the lounge. I wiped his face and undid his collar. I put my jacket over him. He sprawled there breathing noisily, rolling his eyes at the door. There didn't seem to be anything else I could do for a minute. I went into the hall and phoned Moira's parents. The woman came back breathless. She said "The ambulance is on its way."

Moira was on the line. I said "Hello, love, Bill here. Sorry about this but can you come over? Jackie's had an accident. . . ."

She gasped. She said "What is it, is it bad? What's he done?" I heard the back door slam. I said "Get over here, quick as you can." I dropped the phone and sprinted out of the house. He was just backing the Scarlet Lady into the road.

I broke all records for the fifty yards dash. He had to stop to engage first and I got the car door open. He swung at me with the jack handle and I caught his wrist and yanked. He came out neck and crop, rolled over and started to get to his feet still clutching the handle. I hit him when he was halfway up. He was still out when the ambulance came.

They kept him in for the night. Some fool had apparently given him a touch of concussion. They let me see him in the evening. Moira was already there when I arrived. She had a look on her face that suggested they'd sorted things out a bit. He said "Hello, Bill. I tried to brain you, didn't I?"

I laughed. "Bit of a waste of effort, Jackie. Can't lose what I never had."

He put his hand out. "Sorry, Bill. For everything. I don't know what's been happening to me."

I said "Skip it." I had the feeling I'd heard all this before somewhere. His next words gave me some hope. He said "The car, Bill. Will you get rid of her for me?"

I said "You're joking of course."

He shook his head tiredly. "I'm straight, Bill. Just do it. Tonight if you can. Where is she?"

"Still rammed across your drive unless she's steered herself off. That wouldn't surprise me."

He swallowed. "Somehow the car's been the cause of everything. I'm not making excuses, I've been ten sorts of bloody fool, but . . . I can't explain it, Bill. I've been trying

to tell Moira. It was . . . well, like she owned me. I didn't know what I was doing half the time. I'd have killed you this morning if I could."

I stood up. "That's over and done with. The main thing is, are you serious? Because if I get rid of her, brother, you won't see her again."

He licked his lips. "That's what I want. I wouldn't want her running round town. I don't want to see her again. Try and find her a good home, Bill. I don't care if you have to give her away."

I'd already got it organised. "Don't fret, Jackie; I'll see to it for you." I squeezed Moira's arm and left.

First thing next morning I got Tim to drive the big breakdown truck out onto the apron and fuel up. While he was doing it I rang a pal of mine called Ginger Harris. He had a scrapyard over on the other side of Bracewell. When he came on the line I said "Ginger, this is Bill Fredericks from Warrington. I've got a job I want doing. It's pretty urgent. Can you help me out?"

He said "Why, what's up, Bill?"

"I want a car broken. Doesn't matter why. You can have her today if you can do the job straight off."

He said cautiously "Is this on the level, Bill?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Sounds as if you've robbed a bank."

I laughed. "This is straight, Ginge. You can trust me." He didn't argue any more. I've got a pretty good name in the trade. I said "There ought to be a couple of tons of stuff there at least. You'll do all right out of her. See you later on." I put the phone down, locked the office and went out to where Tim was waiting.

We got to Jackie's house and I stopped outside. The Scarlet Lady was still where I'd left her. I said "Give me a hand to swing her into the road, Tim, then we'll hook on."

His eyes widened a bit. He said "But she drives, doesn't she?" I shook my head. "Don't argue, just do what I say. You drive the truck, I'll steer the car. And take it steady. We're going to Ginger's, and I want to get there in one piece."

We pushed the Scarlet Lady out into the road and chained up. I wasn't taking any more risks. Lashed to the back of our truck she couldn't get up to anything. That was the

theory anyway. As we moved off a funny idea came into my mind. I wondered if she knew where she was going.

Twenty yards down the road the tow parted. We got the spare chain out of the truck and fixed it. A quarter of a mile farther on I was bumping along with a flat nearside front tyre and hooting like Hell to stop. I began to sweat. She knew. . . .

There's nothing to being towed as long as the man in front takes it steady. Tim was apt to get a bit enthusiastic ; that's why I'd warned him. He trundled along at thirty for a while. Then he started to build up. By the time we were through Foxwell and about halfway to Ginger's yard he was batting along at a good fifty. But the Scarlet Lady was steering easily and I wasn't too bothered.

Just the other side of Foxwell the road gets hilly and there are a series of awkward bends. The last drop is very steep and there's a vicious left-hander at the bottom. It's one of the three or four Devil's Elbows in the district. On the way down the slope to it I started to close up on the truck, and touched the brake. There was nothing there. The pedal went down to the boards, spongily.

We were doing a good lick and it wasn't funny. I felt the sweat break out again as I pumped the pedal. Liquid splashed across the windscreen ; a front slave cylinder had gone, or a line had broken. I snatched at the handbrake and believe it or not there was a sharp snap and the handle came back loose. I shoved the clutch down and tried to crash the car into gear. Would she go? Would she Hell. . . .

I was in the worst sort of trouble. The back of the truck was looming over me and the chain between us was flicking about and throwing big loops up over the car's bonnet. Any second now Tim was going to brake and I should overrun that tow and fetch it up round one of the front wheels. After that God alone knew where I should end up. I did the only thing there was left. The road was well banked and I steered off, trying to force the side of the car against the grass to reduce my speed. There was no time to play with the gears now. I needed both hands to steer. The car ploughed into the side, cannoned across the road and back. Grass and earth flew ; the tow snatched and tightened.

I saw Tim look back through the rear window of the

cab and prayed he wouldn't do the first thing that came into his mind and step on the anchors. He didn't. He throttled instead and went at the hill flat out.

They say at such times your past life goes in front of your eyes. I can't claim that happened to me but I know I remembered the four individual rows I'd had with Sheila and regretted each one of them. The car was cutting huge swathes out of the grass and I had the wheel locked over to keep her in to the bank. The whole column was vibrating and my arms felt as if they were being fetched out at the sockets. Tim had his headlights on full beam and he was sounding whenever he could spare a hand for the horn button.

We made it somehow. I shall never know how. I swear we touched seventy on the way down. I saw the trees round the Elbow. They were coming up so fast it seemed we were dropping straight into their tops like linked stones. Then we ran out of road. I had a glimpse of drystone walling inches away, saw a car bumping up the opposite verge to get away from us. There was a feeling like you get on a roller coaster ; we went into the corner with four wheels between us, there was a crash as the chain slewed me back straight, then we were round, with a long gradient on which to slow down. Tim stopped about fifty yards below the crest and the car rolled up to the truck, bumped gently and fell back. I snicked her into first to hold her and got out on the road.

Tim came round looking white. He said "What was it, brakes?"

I nodded. I didn't trust my voice yet. I lay down on the road and pushed my head under the car's wing to see what had happened.

I heard the clunk as she came out of gear, and rolled away. She turned out in an arc and I lay and watched the offside front wheel go over the slack of my sleeve. Her tail hit the bank and she stopped again, this time for keeps. I went and sat by the hedge. In front of me the car gleamed in the sunlight. Where she'd ploughed into the bank the branches and stones had ripped the paint off and all along her wing and bonnet were sparks and slashes of red where the old colour was showing through. It looked as if she'd

been bleeding at the mouth. I lit a cigarette. I figured I'd earned the smoke.

Tim came and squatted by me. He said "We can't tow her now. Not without brakes. What are you going to do?"

I said "You think about it." He frowned for a minute, then he started to grin. He unshackled the breakdown truck, backed it down the hill and coupled on behind. I got in the Scarlet Lady and started up. I didn't think she'd motor but she still had some pride left. We got to Ginger's yard in the only way possible, drove in and stopped both vehicles by the shed where he did his sorting.

He came out and stood with his hands on his hips and laughed. He said "Which one's the wreck?"

I said "Funny man. Where do you want her?"

He wagged his thumb at a line of derelict cars across the field. "Doesn't matter. Anywhere over there." I drove the Scarlet Lady to the end of the line, switched off and got out. He followed me across. He said "She's a goer then."

I opened the bonnet, took the wheelmaul off the scuttle and laid it round the distributor a few times. "Not any more she isn't."

He said "I still reckon you've robbed a bank."

"All right, so we cut you in for a share when we dig up the loot. When can you start on her, Ginger?"

He shrugged. "Today maybe, tomorrow perhaps. Before the week-end at least."

I walked back to the breakdown truck. I said "Don't get sentimental, will you? It wouldn't be worth your while."

He laughed again and ran a hand through his bright hair. "Can't afford it in this game, Bill. I only weep at the sight of a tenner." I left him to get on with the job and drove back feeling I'd done a good piece of work.

I was restless that evening. I prowled round the house until even Sheila snapped at me to sit down or go out and have a drink or something. I tried to concentrate on the television but it was no use. When I went to bed I couldn't sleep. It was a mild, still night. I lay and tossed until the sky started to brighten. I did sleep then. I had a vivid dream.

I was in a steel place, a cell or the inside of a machine. The details weren't clear but it was a complex structure full of planes and angles. I was trapped, and They were

coming. I could hear Them beating at the walls. The sound of the hammers got closer and louder and everything began to glow cherry red like metal under a torch. Then the walls crumbled and fell in and I sat up with a yell and Sheila was coming into the room with cups of tea on a tray. She said "Bill, what on earth's the matter? Were you dreaming or something?" I looked round. It was full daylight. The morning was sunny. Somewhere a builder was working. I could hear the ringing of a trowel on brick. I found I was covered with sweat. Sheila sat down on the bed. "Come on, it's half past seven. You're going to be late."

Our first job that day was geting a recon engine into a Rover Ninety. We'd cleared everything for lowering the night before and I started on it straight away, swinging the unit up on a tackle and jockeying the car underneath. Tim lowered away while I steadied the engine down onto its bearers. I was leaning over the bonnet trying to wriggle the block into place when something hit me. I had the momentary idea the roof had caved in. When my sight cleared I was on my knees beside the car. Tim had his hands on my shoulders trying to pull me up. He said "What happened, Bill, what did you do?"

I shook my head. It was still thick with pain. "Who slugged me?"

He was wide-eyed. "Nobody, Bill, you just fell over. Are you sick, can I get a doctor?"

I got up, swaying. "Carry on for a minute. Be all right, got to sit down." I walked toward the office. Halfway there the pain got me again. I leaned on the wall until it passed. I sat at my desk, shut the door and tried to light a cigarette. The pain came back. It was like hammer blows between the eyes. I blacked out. When I came round I felt better. Tim was in the office with me. He was picking up the phone. I reached out for it. He said "No, Bill, you're sick. Got to get a doctor."

I took the handset off him. "I'm all right. It's gone off now. Just a dizzy spell. Got a call to make." The phone was ringing for Ginger before I realized what I was doing. I slammed the receiver down as if it had suddenly got hot. I'd been about to tell him not to scrap the Scarlet Lady after all, I'd take her over myself.

I stood up and went to the door. I'd got to get out for a bit. I said "You'll have to carry on for a while, Tim. If anybody comes tell 'em I'll be back later." I left him staring, got in the Vauxhall and drove away.

The pain came back but I kept moving. It eased when I was ten miles from the garage. I kept going. The tank was full and I didn't care where I went. I had to have time to think.

An hour later I was deep in the country. I pulled up at a little pub, cleaned my hands, ditched my overalls and went in. I had a beer and a couple of sandwiches. After that I walked. I found a place where a brook ran close to the road. There was a swell of ground that made it secluded. I could see neither cars nor houses. That suited me fine. I sat and smoked and looked at the water and the late autumn colours of the trees. It was the middle of the afternoon before I realized I was hungry. I got up feeling better than I'd done for weeks. I told myself I must make a note of the place and bring Sheila sometime. It would be great in the summer. I drove back to the garage. When I got there Tim had locked up and gone. I went on home.

I made some excuse about the lunchtime and settled in front of the telly. About nine I got up. I said "I'm just slipping down the road for a packet of fags love. Shan't be long." I didn't stop at the off-licence of course. I drove out to Ginger's place. The moon was up when I got there. Everything had an unreal, ghostly appearance. I got out of the car and looked over the gate. A skull watched me from across the field. I climbed the gate and started to walk toward it. I just had to know.

From the road the car had looked intact but when I got closer I saw Ginger had been as good as his word. She was a shell. The bonnet was there and the windshield, but the rest of her body from the doorpillars back had been stripped down to the chassis. Remnants of headlining moved gently like funeral ribbons. She had no wheels; her brakedrums were resting on piles of bricks.

I walked back round in front of her. She could still glare. I shook my head and stared at her for a long time. I said softly "Could you have done that, sent those pains? Was that how you felt when the torch got you?"

There was no answer of course. I took a step forward. I said "I've never seen anything like you. Can a machine be sentient?"

I heard something crack and leaped away. The bricks gave and the ruined body lunged forward. The brakedrums dug in the grass and she stopped a yard from my feet. She'd come as far toward me as she could, without wheels. . . .

I took the gate at a run and started up the Vauxhall. I didn't even use the mirror until I had streetlamps behind me.

Tim had to go past Ginger's place the next day and I asked him to keep a lookout. He came back and said the job was almost done ; Ginge had stripped her to the chassis and taken her engine out. I felt a wave of relief. At long last and far too late, that was the end of her.

I was wrong just once again. On the Saturday of that week she did the worst thing ever. And of course, I had to be there to see it.

Last thing on Friday a chap came in with an old Morris. The dynamo had burned out, could I find him a replacement? I phoned about but nobody had a spare. I tried Ginger. As I'd expected he'd got a shelf full of the things.

I drove over myself next morning as I wanted to make sure I got the right unit. I saw Ginger across the field. He had a heavy chassis propped up on its side and he was working on it with a torch. I recognized all that was left of the Scarlet Lady. I went into the shed and started rummaging about. A lad came out and looked in the door. I said "It's all right son, I always help myself. Tell Ginger I've come for the dynamo, will you?" He nodded and scuttled away.

I saw the thing I wanted and reached to lift it down. As my hand closed on the casing there was a crash from across the field and a series of noises that I suppose you could describe as screams. A pair of legs started running. I was attached to them so I went along.

I found out the details of what happened later. The boy told Ginger I was there and he nodded, cut off the flame, shoved his goggles up on his forehead and turned away to hang the torch on the gas cylinders. As he did so the chassis fell over. There was no reason for it ; it was supported well enough. The side member hit Ginger behind the knees,

knocked him on his face and pinned him. It didn't hold him with any great weight. It didn't have to. The part that lay across his legs was the part he'd just been working on, and the edges of the steel were red-hot. . . .

I forced myself to go back there on the Sunday. I found all the combustible parts of the car, the seats, tyres, even the floorcarpets, made a pile of them and burned them. I finished cutting the chassis apart, working on it as it lay in the grass. By the time I'd done no piece was over two feet long. I dealt with the body panelling the same way. I got the block out of the shed and smashed the top hamper with a sledge. I cracked up the gearbox and diff, the dynamo, the starter motor, even the battery. I got it all into a heap and left it. On Monday I called the man who collected Ginger's scrap and made it worth his while to do a special trip. I went over to show him what I wanted loading. When he saw the bits he shoved his cap back and laughed. He said "What's you done to this one then?"

I said "Cut it up."

He shook his head. "You haven't cut it up, mate, you've bloody murdered it."

We got the block onto the lorry, then all the rest of the junk. When we'd finished he got in and started up. I watched the lorry bumping away.

I saw something lying in the grass. I shouted after him. "Hang on, we've missed a bit." I picked up the length of girder, walked to the tailboard and threw it over onto the load. Something bit my hand sharply and I snatched it back. There was a long gash across the palm where a sharp edge had sliced the flesh.

I waved the lorry away, stood until its engine faded in the distance. Then I looked at my wet, bright hand and started to laugh. I leaned on the shed and let the noise come out, building a tower of sound. When I was through I walked to the Vauxhall. A mile up the road I remembered I'd still got the Scarlet Lady's keys somewhere. I stopped, searched my pockets till I found them and threw them over a hedge. I drove home.

As a matter of fact, I'm writing this in hospital—I seem to have got a touch of septicaemia from this hand. I've enjoyed the rest and the opportunity to write all this down,

but I'll be glad to get home. Though Christ knows the doctors—several of them now—seem determined to dramatise everything: screens around the bed all today, if you please.

— ALISTAIR BEVAN

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